

GOLDEN GATE GROOVES

MY INTERNATIONAL BLUES CHALLENGE (IBC) EXPERIENCE

by Carlos Velasco, Drummer, Tip of the Top

Photos by Rachel Kumar



Photo ©2011 by Rachel Kumar

All in all, Memphis was a great trip! It didn't start out that way for me because the worst storm to hit the country in years decided to bury Texas on Tuesday, the day I flew out of San Jose. Weather reports the night before were all about a storm they called The Beast, covering 33 states and delaying all flights. Tuesday morning, I arrived at the American Airlines ticket counter

in San Jose and was told my flight from Dallas to Memphis *might* be cancelled. My options were to leave on my scheduled 8 a.m. flight, or take the 4:00 p.m. flight. I decided to take the 8 a.m. flight. Finally in Dallas, my connecting flight to Memphis *was* cancelled. The next flight would be at 8 a.m., *maybe*, if the weather permits. I was stuck in Dallas until morning.

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I got a room at a nearby hotel, courtesy of The Golden Gate Blues Society, and called the band. Aki Kumar, Tip of the Top's outstanding harmonica player, had been monitoring my flights the entire time, knowing there might be delays. He left messages for me to let him know where I was and when I arrived in Dallas, and then Memphis. Frank DeRose, Aki, and Jon Lawton had left the day before with no problems. I, on the other hand, was caught in the middle of The Beast. When I called Aki, I told him American Airlines cancelled all flights and I had to wait until morning. He replied, "That's a bunch of crap; we can get you on another airline!" He was worried I wouldn't make it to Memphis in time for our first set Wednesday night, and he was right! I found out the next day, American Airlines cancelled every flight for



the rest of the day. While I was stuck in Dallas, Aki called a friend who knew a lot about the airlines, how they work, and what to do if flights are cancelled. What Aki found out was, I could cancel my flight with American Airlines, get a refund, and tell them I want to use Rule 240! Good thing Aki told me about that rule! The American Airlines' customer rep didn't want to give me a refund. He said, "What makes you think other airlines will be able to fly out if we can't?" Once I laid Rule 240 on him, he gave me a refund with no hassle. In the meantime, Aki had booked me a flight on Delta Air Lines. I got a decent night's sleep and was on the 6 a.m. Delta flight to Memphis. Way to think fast, Aki!

THE MAGIC OF MEMPHIS

I arrived in Memphis at 7 a.m. I was tired, hungry, and not in the mood to play in a competition. My bags were still on the cancelled American Airlines' plane in Dallas, so I wasn't able to look my prettiest for the competition. That made Aki happy because he likes to be the prettiest! The American Airlines' agent in Memphis assured me they'd get my bags to the hotel, and said to make sure I try Gus' Fried Chicken. I walked out to the curb of the air terminal and began looking for the shuttle company The Golden Gate Blues Society had booked for us. Then I heard, "Are you Carlos?" I looked up and saw Alonso, the shuttle driver, standing there with the biggest, warmest smile I'd ever seen (only second to my wife, of course)! He said, "You were supposed to be here yesterday, I've been waiting for you all night long!" "What?" I replied. "No, Aki told me what happened and said you'd be in this morning, so here I am!" In the

10 minutes it took to drive to the hotel, Alonso told me the entire history of Memphis! I told him about my canceled flights, my job, the competition, my mortgage, my concerns for the economy, and how my phone was about to die because my phone charger was back with my bags at American Airlines in Dallas. When I got out of the shuttle, Alonso loaned me his spare phone charger and said, "Make sure you try Gus' Fried Chicken, best in town!"

Finally in my room in Memphis, I called Aki to let him know I made it. I had 2 hours before I could go to the famous Memphis Drum Shop. My hi-hats, brushes, and sticks were back on the American Airlines' plane and wouldn't arrive until *after* the first round of the competition. I didn't bring a snare drum because I had planned to possibly buy one at the drum shop, which didn't open until 10 a.m., giving me a few hours to figure out how I would get there. I went to the front desk of the hotel and asked for a cab. The lady who drove the hotel shuttle, Beezy, offered to take me whenever I was ready. At 9:45 a.m., she picked me up and took me to the drum shop. On the way, I asked her what restaurants she would recommend I try while in town, "Gus' Fried Chicken, best in town!" She must have seen some worried or stressed look on my face because she asked, "Are you alright son?" I told about the trip, the competition, my job, my mortgage, and my concerns with the economy. After getting all my worries off my chest, I asked her, "Why is everyone so nice here?" Her reply was, "Well, every gem needs friction, and we've had our share of friction. Memphis is one gem of a town." She was right about that. In my 2.5 hours in Memphis, I met some of the kindest, warmest, thoughtful, most embracing citizens. It was my first taste of southern hospitality and I started to relax.

I had called the Memphis Drum Shop on Monday, the day before I left San Jose, and asked about a Joyful Noise snare I saw them demonstrate on YouTube. I told them I would be there at some point during the week. When I walked in, they had the snare ready and waiting for me! It was 10 a.m. I was the first one in the store, but within 10 minutes, drummers were flying through the door. The place was busy. What a beautiful store, a drummer's paradise! Off in the distance, I heard one of the salesmen banging out the tightest New Orleans Rag I've ever heard! What a groove! In the next room, another salesman started doing a second line funk beat! Aw, man! All I wanted to say was, "Teach me how to do that!" With time running out, I had to get down to business and find a snare. I looked at the Joyful Noise

snare I called about. Wow! What a powerful snare! The rings and tones were beautiful!

The salesman remembered I played a Pearl Reference snare, so he brought one out, just like mine back home. He set it up next to the Joyful Noise snare, allowing me to compare the two snares. The Pearl held up well but the Joyful Noise sounded a bit “fatter” and had more tones. Rob, the salesman, tuned the Pearl to different tensions, first low, then medium, then high. I did the same on the Joyful Noise. He sat next to me and we banged out some grooves together, listening as if the two snares were challenging each other on tones and textures. I was having a great time. We had an impromptu snare drum jam session. He threw some nice phrases at me and I



Photo ©2011 by Rachel Kumar

replied with a few of my own. We were both cracking up! I never had so much fun buying a drum! I was now having a great time in Memphis. On the way back, Beezy asked if I bought the snare. She said, “I knew you did because you look excited.” I told her about the great time I had. We arrived back at the hotel and as I was getting out, she wished me the

best of luck and said, “Don’t worry; this town will smooth you out.” I didn’t realize it at the time but the people of Memphis were already turning me into one of its gems. The rough edges I got off the plane with were beginning to smooth out.

THE COMPETITION

Back in my room with a new snare, brushes, and sticks, it was time to rest and prepare for the competition. Frank and Jon called to welcome me to town and find out if I bought the snare. Aki called and said we’d meet in the



Photo ©2011 by Rachel Kumar

lobby at 4:30 p.m. and walk over to the Rum Boogie on Beale Street for Round 1 of the International Blues Challenge. I had a few hours to kill, so I

walked to Walgreens for a tooth brush, razor, and whatever else I needed that was still back on the plane. As soon as I walked in, the saleslady said, “You look like you were caught in a storm!” After telling her about my trip, the competition, my job, my mortgage, and my

concerns for the economy, she grabbed a basket and walked me around the store filling it with a travel size toothpaste, shaving cream, and other toiletries. She wished me luck and said I had enough in my basket to freshen me up until my bags arrived. I was off to my hotel. All freshened up, I met Aki and Rachel in the lobby at 4:30. The looks on their faces said everything. They were relieved I was there, but was I ready to play? It was the first thing Aki asked, “You feel ok, man?” A warm, welcoming hug from Rachel and we were on our way.



Photo ©2011 by Rachel Kumar

A two block walk and we arrived at the Rum Boogie on time. Tip of the Top was ready to go. From that moment on, the band seemed to

gel. We were excited and eager to see how this town would respond to us. So there we were, at the Rum Boogie, in Memphis, at the IBC, from California, representing The Golden Gate Blues Society! We had a set list ready, but I forgot what it was. I didn’t care. I knew the energy of the band would carry me. We wouldn’t let each other down! We were the second band to play. Jon hit the first note and we began! We fell right into it! Our set was 25 minutes long, but it felt like 5 seconds. We nailed one song after another. We were tighter than we had ever been. The transitions, Aki’s and Jon’s solos, chord changes, the singing, our call and response, dead on and grooving! I got cocky and threw in a few new drum phrases on the new snare and they went over just fine! I looked over at Frank and he was as steady as could be! I looked at Jon and Aki and they were singing and playing their hearts out, just like we were at home - solid! After each song, the place went nuts! Three women were wearing Tip of the Top buttons and dancing up a storm. I had no idea who they were or where they came from. Turns out the day before, the band had met these women who waitress at the Blue Plate Café. Always thinking ahead, Rachel (Aki’s wife [ed. note: and the official photographer for this article]) packed a bunch of buttons. Before you knew it, we were seeing Tip of the Top buttons all over Beale Street! Rachel passed them out to the waitresses at the Blue Plate, who showed up at the Rum Boogie, screaming their heads off for us! The set ended and the place went wild! We thought, hey did Kid Andersen just walk in? Is Johnny Cat in the house? Who are they cheering for, us? Aki walked off stage and a judge gave him a high five! All the other bands came over to congratulate us on a great

set. We were feeling great! From that moment on, people were stopping us on the street to say how much they enjoyed our music. I felt lucky to be with such a fine band in Memphis!

I coached high school football for almost 30 years. I got to know which players were the *go-to-guys*. The go-to-guy wants the ball at crunch time and carries the team. There is no backing down with these players. Frank DeRose, Jon Lawton, and Aki Kumar are go-to-guys. One of my favorite sayings is, big time players make big time plays in big time games. Aki, Jon, and Frank are big time! The beautiful thing about them is they understand that the star of this band is the band! Memphis was not only working its magic on me, but it was making a gem of Tip of the Top! We had a rough, uncertain first 2 days, but all that uncertainty seemed to help us appreciate our time in Memphis even more. The magic of Memphis was real.

It was a good thing we played second that day because the fatigue got to me. After we ate, I went back to my room and went to bed. When I arrived at the hotel, my luggage had been delivered; everything seemed to be falling into place!

DAY TWO

I got a good night's rest and met Aki and Rachel for



Photo ©2011 by Rachel Kumar

breakfast at the Blue Plate. The waitresses were wearing their Tip of the Top buttons. We had a true fan

club! We walked in and they seated us right away! Another band, also competing at the Rum Boogie, was at the Blue Plate as well. They were amazed at how fast we



Photo ©2011 by Rachel Kumar

were building a following. Of course, with Frank always promoting the band and Rachel slapping buttons on everyone, it wasn't too difficult to let

people know we were in town. It was quite a sight to see

strangers walking around town wearing Tip of the Top buttons.

After breakfast, we went back to our rooms and relaxed. I met Aki and Rachel in the lobby at 4:30 and we were back at The Rum Boogie by 5 p.m. This time, we played second to last. It was great to see the other bands play. Each band received a great ovation after their set. They all had something that earned them a spot in Memphis. One band had a killer guitar player, another had a harmonica player, while yet another had fine stage presence. It was great just to be among them. How could this really be judged? They were all great in their own way. No matter how it was expressed, every band spoke a common language of the Blues. From that point on, our trip stopped being a competition and became more of a celebration. As our time to play approached, our excitement to be a part of this Blues "festival" inspired us, and that was exactly how we played - inspired! We were fueled by the other bands and the crowd. The house was packed and the crowd seemed to swell while we set up. We were introduced; Jon hit the first note, and Round 2 began! The 25 minutes flew by. Our set felt like one big ovation. The crowd cheered and



Photo ©2011 by Rachel Kumar

hollered after Jon did one of his stellar solos and again when Aki blew everyone away with one

of his solos! As we played, I looked around and saw the waitresses from the Blue Plate dancing, the musicians watching, and the crowd responding. I knew we were in sync. The grooves were tight and dead on. The best thing about that second night was that the vibe of the crowd carried our emotions. We were not only playing off of each other, but also the crowd. It was the response from the crowd that let us know we were doing well in Memphis. This was an important moment for us because we knew this feeling from home. We've been so fortunate to have such great support from all our friends at home. But would we go over well in Memphis? Would people outside the Bay Area like what we do? This was one of the questions we had and we were eager to find out. That second night, we found out. Tip of the Top was going over well. The people of Memphis embraced us and let us know they loved what we do, just like our friends at home. Of course, no one in Memphis brought

us lemon bars, chocolate chip cookies, cheese cakes, and other treats the way our wonderful friends at home do, and hopefully will continue to do! With Round 2 done, it was time to wait. The semifinalists would be announced at midnight. We decided to eat, walk around, and see the other competitors. We saw many great bands, singers, drummers, guitar and harp players up and down Beale Street! We got the word we made it into the semifinals; time for bed.

DAY THREE

Friday, we got up and went to Sun Records. The tour was about an hour long. It was good to hear Elvis was rejected for a whole year before Sam Phillips gave him a look. We walked back to the hotel and relaxed until the next round. Again, I met Aki in the lobby and we walked

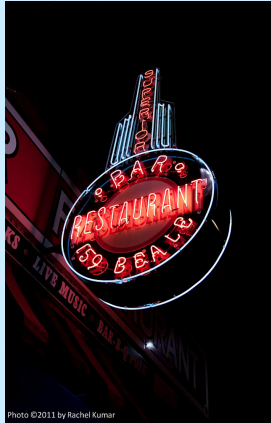


Photo ©2011 by Rachel Kumar

to the Superior Bar. We were the second band to play. We were given 30 minutes for this round, so we added one song to the set, an original called Time Will Tell. We set up; Jon hit the first note and once again we were fueled by the crowd. We felt the grooves lock right in tight. All we had to do after that was listen to each other and respond.

Every once in a while, when we start a song, the backbeat might be wrong or the song is too fast or too slow. When that happens, we have to spend the first few bars fixing and finding that sweet spot. Good thing it rarely happens. Thirty minutes passed like it was two. The crowd was going crazy!



Photo ©2011 by Rachel Kumar

Frank was rock steady and Jon and Aki played possessed! Aki must have channeled Mr. Wilson and Jon must have found some new "Viva" in that crowd because these two brought us to another level! When we got off stage, members of another band, who were waiting to play, told us we could win the competition. And best of all,

Rachel slapped buttons on members of the other bands! Nothing left to do but wait; we stayed for the rest of the competition. There were some good bands; one was a Stevie Ray Vaughan type band [Rachel informs it was David Shelley and Bluestone]. They were tight and had a very good drummer. Another band had a woman singer with a fine voice. We knew these two bands could be trouble for us. As the night moved on, we were feeling pretty good about our chances to make the finals. When our competition was over, Jon and Frank went back to their hotels; Aki and I went to the New Daisy theater to wait for the announcements on who would be in the finals.

As we sat in the theater, Aki and I got into a conversation with two of the judges who judged us the first two nights. They recognized every element we wanted to project and said we had a good chance to make the finals. They had us as the highest scoring band on both nights. One judge saw us the first night and the other judge saw us the second night. They both said we were the talk of the competition. Aki and I were feeling pretty good! Then, just a little after midnight, a young lady ran into the theater screaming that her band had made it into the finals. A few moments later, a guy got on stage and said he has the list of finalists. I looked over at Aki and he had his head down, listening for our name. First the guy read the name of the bar and then he read the winning band from that bar. He read, "From BB Kings ... From Alfred's... From Blues City... Then he read! "FROM



Photo ©2011 by Rachel Kumar

THE SUPERIOR BAR, the Mary Bridget Davies Band!" Hey wait! That's not us! We were at the Superior Bar! He didn't call our name! I sat there

and looked over at Aki who raised his head to look at me. I asked, "It's not us?" He slowly shook his head, no. We both turned and shook the hands of the judges we were talking to, who were trying to console us. They said we're a great band and should be proud of our accomplishment. But to be honest, right then, I didn't feel like we accomplished much. It was a reminder that we were in Memphis for a competition, and we just lost. When Aki and I looked at each other, my heart sank. I felt bad for him, Jon, and Frank, and I'm sure he felt the same way. We walked back to our hotel in silence. Was it really over? We had such high hopes and we had so many well wishers who had high hopes for us. They were following us on Facebook and sending daily text

messages. We looked forward to Peggy DeRose's updates from people sending us good luck and well wishes from home. Did we let everyone down?

The band that made the finals from our group was the woman with the great voice. We thought she had a shot to make the finals, as well as Bluestone, the Stevie Ray type band. A million thoughts raced through our minds as we walked back to the hotel. What could we have done better? What did we do wrong? Back in my room, I woke my wife to tell her the news. I was restless and kept feeling disbelief that it was over. Then my wife said, "Maybe those other bands needed to win more, at this time in their lives, than Tip of the Top did. Don't worry, your day will come." She made a good point. As the tour guide said at Sun Records, Elvis was rejected for a whole year before Sam Phillips gave him a look.

I started thinking of the 2 years that Tip of the Top has been together. In those 2 years, we've had more success than we ever imagined possible and we went to Memphis! After a night of reflection, I couldn't think of this band as losing anything. In fact, I felt extremely lucky to be in this band with three of the best guys I've ever known. During our three sets, there was a vibe running through us that bonded us. We were on top of our game. The emotions and adrenaline of the competition took our music to a place that surprised us. Sure, we could always play better, but every member of the band did more than his share. Later, I saw Frank. He was in a great mood. He said we played great and he was proud of us. It was no big thing to him, just another step in the right direction for the band. He knew it was the luck of the draw. If we had another set of judges, maybe we could have been in the finals. I wanted him to explain this theory over and over again so I'd feel better. It kinda made sense, but I wasn't ready to be at peace with it the way he was. Frank was looking forward to the finals that night. Jon had gone on to see Graceland and Aki, Rachel, Marianne, and I went to the Lorraine Motel [The National Civil Rights Museum], where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated.

THE MAGIC OF MEMPHIS..... AGAIN



Photo ©2011 by Rachel Kumar

The Lorraine Motel was a powerful exhibit to see. Sad and emotional, the four of us walked through the

museum reading and absorbing everything. Now, I seemed far away from the competition. The feeling of being eliminated from the competition began to fade and I was grateful to be sharing something this important with great friends. As we walked back from the Lorraine Motel, it felt good to be in Memphis surrounded by such nice people. We were almost in disbelief, were people really this friendly? Everyone was so kind and interested in who we were and where we were from. Since the competition was over for us, we could soak in the town. We met Frank and Aki after they saw the finals.

They said the band that won, The Lionel Young Band, was awesome and they would have been tough to beat. We met up with Jon and walked around Beale Street one last



Photo ©2011 by Rachel Kumar

time. As we walked down Beale Street, we heard nothing but hip hop

music blasting from all the bars where the competitions were held the day before.

On Sunday morning, we were ready to leave the hotel at 9 a.m. The shuttle pulled up and we started loading in. Just as I put my last bag in the shuttle, another van pulled up. The driver honked and waved. I realized it was Beezy, who drove me to the drum shop! She came to say goodbye. I climbed in and gave her a hug. She said, "I just wanted to say goodbye!" I said, "I think I'm smooth now." She said, "Yep. Memphis is a gem of a town. You come back and we'll smooth you out again."

When we arrived home, we felt as if we had unfinished



business back in Memphis. Should we try to go back to Memphis? As the experience of Memphis sank in, we've realized we really didn't lose. We gained everything we

possibly could from the competition. We shared a great experience and every gig we've played since has been better. So why should we try again? I'll tell you why, because it's exciting as hell! The highs and lows we



experienced were incredible! We couldn't wait to play! The adrenalin racing through us was a total rush of energy. The IBC was an awesome roller coaster of emotions, so it might just be worth doing again. The experience of the competition and Memphis helped make Tip of the Top one gem of a band! Thanks Memphis, you really were magical. And thanks to The Golden Gate Blues Society, without you, there would be no Memphis to shoot for... If you ever get to Memphis,

be sure to stop by the Blue Plate Cafe. Tell Madeline, Jena, and Rubianne that Tip of the Top sent you!

[Ed. notes: I asked Carlos if they ever made it to Gus' Fried Chicken and, sadly, the answer was "no." The Golden Gate Blues Society is extremely proud of our first-ever entrant in the International Blues Challenge. If your band is interested in participating in the 2012 IBC, please see the Rules and application form included later in this edition of Golden Gate Grooves.]

THE PRESIDENT'S CORNER

by Dorothy L. Hill



Well, a year has passed since I became the President of The Golden Gate Blues Society, and we have just begun. We have made some important strides during this period, and I want to thank our members for their support. We have increased membership and exposure for our band members.

One of our missions is to assist

local musicians and we have opened avenues that resulted in some of them getting club bookings and the opportunity to open for headliners. Our International Blues Challenge (IBC) events were successful beyond our expectations. With over 110 bands competing in Memphis, our band, Tip of the Top, made it to the semifinals. The Society raised all the funds to send the band to Memphis—not all blues societies do this and I have to say that it was a major accomplishment. You, our members, made that possible by attending our local challenges and supporting our fundraising efforts.

We have now held an election for the Board of Directors. As I learned over this year, it is necessary for our membership to take ownership of the Society. It is important to have more participation and, for this reason, we have increased the number of Directors to 11, with the top 7 vote-getters holding office for 2 years and

the remaining 4 directors holding office for 1 year. The 2-year Directors are Dorothy L. Hill, President; Ron Purser, Vice President; Brad Robertson, Treasurer; Judy Edmonson, Secretary; Deb Lubin, Publications; Wendy DeWitt, Media; and Stan Erhart, Membership and Website. Those elected for 1 year terms are Wendell Hanna, Education; Susan Preece, IBC; Jenifer Santer, Events; and Jan Bilbao, At Large.

One of the first missions this year will be to restructure our Bylaws; I have appointed our Vice President, Ron Purser, to take on this task with a committee that will also include Society members.

Our IBC Coordinator, Susan Preece, is busy working on the 2012 challenges and we have tentatively scheduled the first event for July 17, 2011. We will keep you informed on the details as they are formulated. *[Please note that the rules for entry and an application form for your use are included in this newsletter.]*

I look forward to the coming year. We have a lot of work to do and I pledge to aggressively promote The Golden Gate Blues Society in my role as President and I expect our members to do the same. I want to make this Society an organization of which we can all be proud. I am on a crusade to preserve, support, and grow Blues for the next generation. Can I depend on YOU to help with that effort?





www.tggbs.org or e-mail bluezluvr@sbcglobal.net

RULES – 2011 TGGBS INTERNATIONAL BLUES CHALLENGE (IBC)

WHO CAN ENTER?

A Blues band or performer cannot enter the International Blues Challenge (IBC) directly. Only a blues society—in this case, The Golden Gate Blues Society (TGGBS)—may sponsor an act. An act is eligible so long as:

- It is a TGGBS band member in good standing and agrees to remain so throughout the duration of the 2012 IBC up to and including the term of their participation.
- It has never received a Blues Music Award (formerly, W.C. Handy Award) nomination.
- All other musicians who have had peripheral or professional contact through performing with a Blues Music Award nominee, including, but not limited to, touring band members and studio musicians, are eligible to participate in the IBC.
- An act is limited to two consecutive appearances at the IBC and must then sit out at least one year before being eligible to compete again. An act under the same name will not be allowed to compete three consecutive years.

Bands wishing to be considered for TGGBS sponsorship in the IBC should submit a CD and press kit to TGGBS no later than June 15, 2011. Nonmember acts may enclose band membership dues (\$40 per year) with their submission. An evaluation committee will review the submissions and qualify the bands.

Qualifying bands will be notified as soon as possible to ascertain availability so that event planning and promotion can begin.

Performance order for each preliminary event will be randomly selected and the last band to perform (the preferred spot) shall supply the backline. To facilitate fast set turnovers, we prefer a single backline for each event, at a minimum, a consistent drum kit (sans cymbals) and bass amp to use for all sets. We will allow guitar, harp, and keyboards to change between sets.

CRITERIA

TGGBS will use The Blues Foundation's established scoring criteria. Categories include: Talent, Vocal, Blues Content, Stage Presence, and Originality.



www.tggbs.org or e-mail bluezluvr@sbcglobal.net

ENTRY FORM – 2011 TGGBS INTERNATIONAL BLUES CHALLENGE (IBC)

Submission of this form confirms that you are an authorized representative of the band and that you agree to the terms and conditions below. Submission will verify that you and all other band members understand and meet the eligibility requirements (see attached rules).

Date ____/____/____

Band/Performer Name _____

Contact Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip Code _____

Home Phone (____) _____ Cell Phone (____) _____

E-Mail of Authorized Representative _____

Band/Performer Website _____

TGGBS Band Member? ____ Yes ____ No

I acknowledge that I have read The Golden Gate Blues Society International Blues Challenge rules and I am/my band is eligible to participate in the IBC. I agree that should this band/performer win the IBC sponsored by TGGBS, I/we will participate in a fundraising concert to defray expenses to send the band to the IBC sponsored by The Blues Foundation in Memphis, Tennessee, February 1-4, 2012.

Signature _____ Print Name _____

Mail Entry Form, Band Bio (list all band members/instruments and tenure in the band), **CD (3 songs minimum), and Promo to:** IBC – The Golden Gate Blues Society

P.O. Box 2591
Redwood City, CA 94064

DEADLINE: JUNE 15, 2011

CD REVIEWS

by Joseph Jordan

Nancy Wenstrom, *Blues Kitchen*



Houston-born and longtime Bay Area resident Nancy Wenstrom has just put out her third CD, “Blues Kitchen,” and it’s a terrific addition to her 30-year musical career. She was a guitar slinging mainstay in one of the first Bay Area big-

time R&B corporate party/club bands of several years back, The Zasu Pitts Memorial Orchestra, and she’s also played with any number of Bay Area groups.

Clocking in at 46-minutes, Wenstrom’s “Blues Kitchen” will give roadhouse/rockin’ blues fans their money’s worth. The songs are chosen well for Wenstrom’s pleasing contralto and her guitar playing stretches from mellow to incendiary as the tunes demand.

Wenstrom’s voice is extremely pleasing and there’s not a hint of her being an over-reaching blues mama in the songs’ delivery. She doesn’t need to awe us with vocal pyrotechnics when she can sing this well, and all within the context of each song. That’s a good thing, and Wenstrom’s voice is continuously strong. She’s not a belter, nor does she need to be... the one-two punch of her vocals and guitar playing is enough.

Her equally impressive guitar chops are a treat for listeners throughout... sultry, jazz infused at times, and she can play blues with a feeling.

Recorded in Hayward and Cotati and produced by Wenstrom and outstanding trumpet-player Brad Catania, the album sounds crisp, clear, and clean. The separation between instrument tones and vocals are near-perfect.

Wenstrom wrote 6 of the album’s 11 tracks, and among other songwriters covered are Little Milton, Jimi Hendrix, and B.B. King, to which the band pays appropriate homage. Her take on T-Bone Walker’s “T-Bone Shuffle” rocks it with a laid back delivery that provides a different musical approach than we usually hear.

Wenstrom’s original and lovingly soulful “Angel of the Blues” is most likely the strongest track on the recording, and features an impassioned vocal along with her terrific guitar accompaniment. Her wah-wah pedal-work on the well-known B.B. King standard “(I’m) So Excited” is not

overly done, and features her fine rhythm and lead guitar playing.

The original “Walk Together Children” celebrates love as it should be in a peaceful world. The backing “party track” comes out of nowhere toward the end of it though, and is somewhat distracting, but the song is a lovely one.

The album’s horn arrangements by co-producer Catania are outstanding and mixed perfectly by engineers Don Turney, Jane Clark, and, on one cut, “Generosa.” In fact, the horns alone are pretty much worth the price of admission on this one.

“Blues Kitchen” enjoys outstanding players in saxophonist Guido Fazio and trumpeter Catania. Keyboards are handled with aplomb by Don Turney. Kendrick Freeman’s drumming is just right throughout. I wish that standout bassist Jan Martinelli’s (who is all over this album) mix had a bit more sonic/volume bottom to it, but that’s a minor quibble.

The CD has wonderful trifold packaging with track-by-track player ID and a playful blue sky/red brick background motif.

This one’s a winner.

WCM Records – 2010

Check out: www.nancywenstrom.com

The Fritz Brothers, *The Fritz Brothers*



Unlike most modern blues players, East Bay-based brothers Joel and Dan Fritz perform pre-World War Two country/folk blues, and play it well enough to have wanted to create this pleasing slice of Americana on this, their first CD.

Clocking in at 47 minutes and containing 11 acoustic tracks, many which are well-known blues and folk standards (Statesboro Blues, Key to the Highway, etc.), this fine effort will serve as a quiet alternative to the mainstream electric blues so prevalent on today’s scene.



Most of the tunes date back to the 1930s, as there are no original tunes found on the CD. Among the songwriters covered are Sleepy John Estes, Robert Johnson, and The Mississippi Sheiks; unfortunately, however, the packaging contains no liner notes or song credits.

Recorded live at Whip Records studio in Berkeley, and engineered by blues musician David Landon, the Fritz Brothers' self-produced CD includes songs that feature harmonica (Dan), 6- and 12-string and slide guitars (Joel), and besides lead vocals from the both of them, nothin' else. The digitally recorded tracks are crisp and present, as the Brothers were recorded in separate rooms from each other, and there was little-to-no overdubbing on most of the tunes.

59-year old Dan's background includes playing in electric blues bands (he was in a Bay Area band in the '90s named Built for Comfort) while Joel (who also goes by the stage name Barrelhouse Solly), now in his mid-60s, has enjoyed playing in various musical groups. While both brothers have been playing since their mid-teens, in

their current incarnation, the two have been playing together for about 3 years.

The brothers Fritz set out to capture the quality and sound of their live gigs, and they did that impressively. Both are fine musicians. Their vocals are traditionally approached and sans flourish, without necessarily being soulful, and might be an acquired taste for some. Both brothers have strong vibratos, a fine sense of timing and phrasing, and their vocal harmonies are fraternally pleasing.

Joel's finger-picking and slide work are exemplary and Dan's harp playing is excellent. Throughout the CD, the brothers strike the right notes at the right moments. And although the album cuts tend to be a bit repetitious, they are true to their form.

Check out: <http://www.myspace.com/thefritzbrothers> or email: bluesharp@comcast.net.

Fritz Brothers Music – 2010



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JOHNNY NITRO, THE MAYOR OF THE NORTH BEACH BLUES SCENE

September 2, 1951 – February 19, 2011

by Johnny Ace, with editing assistance from Cathy Lemons

It was early 1978. I was doin' a steady Monday night jam at North Beach's now way over and gone famed Coffee Gallery on Grant Street with my pal and roommate, drummer Walter Shufflesworth. We had many different players in our little house band. A lot of good players would sit in and a lot of pretty horrible players would come in and really stink up the stage with their lack of talent. I will say this: there never was a dull moment!

It was back then that we all met Johnny Nitro, who, at that time, was known as Johnny Newton. He'd usually come in with his wife, Margaret, who played some pretty tasty boogie woogie piano. He had very long, flaming red hair down his back and always wore old Hawaiian shirts that were popular at that time. He looked like he just rolled out of bed. His appearance was a bit gruff. We affectionately called him "Red." He was always in very deep thought and a bit uptight too, like he was getting ready to explode, but always a very nice guy. I don't think he really enjoyed our strange behavior. I don't remember Johnny going wild on the drinking and other unlawful recreational habits that we were involved in at that time. He played guitar nice, but nothing to write home about.

Walter and me, along with our pal Tommy Giblin from Cedar Rapids, Iowa, who played Hammond B3 organ, were trying to put a wailin' R&B band together—kind of in the spirit of James Brown and His Famous Flames of the 1959-'64 period. We were dreaming. I left San Francisco in 1980 for fame and fortune and went back home to New York City. Then, 5 years later, in 1985, I called up Walter, who had by then put his R&B band The Dynatoners together. They were already recording and working all over the country. I asked him if he needed me to sing in his band. He said that he just hired a guy from Florida, CC Miller. He said no go. But then he asked me if I remembered that guitar player, Red, from the old jams at The Coffee Gallery. I said "Yeah." Well, Walter told me that he wasn't Red anymore, but now Johnny Nitro, and that he was wearing sharkskin suits, and that he was wailin' on the guitar, and that he ruled North Beach. He told me to get with him.

So on October 22, 1986, I left NYC for San Francisco—still searchin' for those rainbows. Now with a wife and four kids, I took a risk. My wife and I had arranged that she would come out a month or so before me to find and rent a pad and get things settled. From NYC, I got a guy

with a truck to drive all of our stuff to San Francisco—mostly my 146 boxes of records and books. Nitro had, by then, split up with Margaret. They had a young daughter Kirstin. Nitro's new lady, Tracy, had a book store on Polk Street. I paid her and Johnny to pick up all my records and books at the airport and bring them to the new pad in San Francisco's Mission District. At that time, Johnny had a bassist, so he didn't need me.

Instead, I put a band together that did one gig. It was all wrong. Then I did two gigs with The Midnight Movers. They had drummer Kelvin Dixon and bassist Steve Parks both singing. It sounded real fine, but since they didn't need a singer or a bass player, they didn't need me, so I was still lookin' for a band.

I then split up with my wife. I was livin' alone at the St. Paul Hotel on Kearny Street across from Francis Ford Coppola's gorgeous building in North Beach. Ever since I knew Red, now Johnny Nitro, he had worked with Texas lap steel wiz, Sonny Rhodes, who was now living in Oakland. I think being with and learning from Sonny really helped Johnny develop as a bluesman, and also hangin' with Sonny's bassist, the late Cowboy, didn't hurt Johnny any either. I know some of that Texas-Oakland grease got into Nitro's fingers and soul from that experience. Other big influences, also from Texas, were The Fabulous Thunderbirds and Stevie Ray Vaughan; they were tearing it up with their own brand of very loud, fiery blues. Sometime in 1983, Johnny formed his first Doorslammers band. They put out one 45. There were MANY, MANY Doorslammers over the years.

Then Nitro's new bass player quit. I can't remember his name. He was really good, but he knew nothing about playing blues. He played the very popular slap-funk bass style with a lot of notes. All those high pitched tones were very irritating to my ears. Anyway, this guy landed a good money gig with Maria Muldaur and had to go to Europe real quick. Nitro hired me. This was in the early part of 1987. Nitro saved my ass. I couldn't find a gig. I don't think people understood me. MERCY! My bass playing made Nitro's band sound fatter and enabled Nitro to have the freedom and space musically to wail. The rhythm section was solid with me in the band; I kept a very simple, pulsating groove going. Gary James was then on drums along with a keyboard player named Arthur from L.A. Arthur passed on some months later. Nitro sold me Arthur's bass bottom, which today is STILL

my main bass bottom. It has THE sound and vibes in it! MERCY! To replace Arthur, we got our pal and singer/harpist, Perry Welsh. This made the Doorslammers even better.

To digress a bit, I get to blame Johnny for my deafness. Some time in 1986, when Johnny was running a jam at this great old club where Lenny Bruce used to work called The Chi Chi Club, I was playing on a slow blues when Johnny hit this one note that was SO loud. He sustained it SO long that it felt like Joe Pesci of *Goodfellas* was nailing an ice pick into my right ear. It was “the note from NITRO HELL!” My hearing has never been the same! Nitro now had his own style, voice, and persona. He had it all together, bad for my hearing, but GREAT for Nitro. I was very happy for him.

Back then, there was plenty of work. On Grant Street alone, there were three clubs we worked at regularly: The Saloon, where Nitro had steady Friday and Sunday night gigs; The Lost & Found, formerly known as The Coffee Gallery, where we did weeknights; and on the



corner of Grant and Green streets, there was that club we affectionately called “The Stain Room,” the infamous and very contagious Grant & Green. Those three clubs, along with JJ’s in San Jose, Bouncer’s on Second and Townsend, and Larry Blake’s in Berkeley (plus private parties) kept us working 6

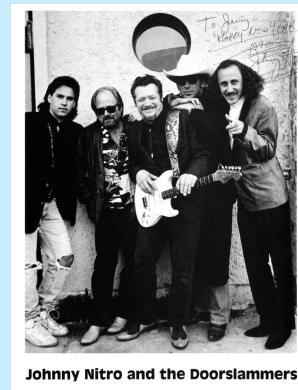
nights a week. The fun we had! MERCY!

Johnny would pick me up and drive me to the out-of-town gigs. We’d have great raps—sometimes very deep. It was on those drives that we really got to know each other. Johnny grew up in Sacramento, California, where we would occasionally play at a place called The Hofbrau (wasn’t much fun compared to North Beach). We’d sleep over at Johnny’s mom’s place if we had gigs up there and that’s where I met his whole family, including his stepfather. I also met his real father. Johnny’s mom would make the whole band dinner. She was a very kind, sweet, and gentle soul. I saw where Johnny got a lot of his goodness from.

Nitro told me when he was a kid, he liked to draw. That didn’t surprise me as so many other musicians, including myself, loved to draw before they learned how to play music. There were two or three paintings of clowns in his mom’s house that were proudly hung on display that Johnny painted in his younger days. It turns out that his

brother, who I met once, was a professional clown. Johnny also liked football and cars. He was always working on cars. He had a job out at the drag strip a bit later in his life. This is where the “Nitro” name came from. At 13, he got a bass and played with various basement bands—2 years later, he got his first guitar. He loved Chuck Berry and some of the British invasion bands when he was growing up. Later, when he got into the blues, he loved and studied the styles of Albert King, T-Bone Walker, Guitar Slim, and Albert Collins. He graduated from high school and left Sacramento for San Francisco, where he attended the San Francisco Art Institute on the outskirts of North Beach. There, he took some courses in film along with drawing and painting. I don’t know if he finished art school. I do know that he loved music more than art and that he stayed in San Francisco to play music.

1987 flew into 1988. And 1988 just vanished into 1989. We now had, along with Perry Welsh on harp and vocals, a young kid just 18 out of Oakland, Scott Rabino, who



Johnny Nitro and the Doorslammers

played drums, plus the wailin’ Stu Blank on vocals/keyboards. This band was very, VERY strong. And crazy! I’m not sure who was worse in terms of our nasty habits and bad behavior. We were all going wild, and Nitro, who was straight, was getting a little upset with us—just a little. The band was so good. I was into my last

big wave of debauchery—trying to enter outer space while still standing on my feet playing bass.

One night back at Grant & Green, Nitro just couldn’t understand what the big deal was with this Jägermeister, a German liqueur that me and the guys were swillin’ down like water and goin’ crazy on—well mainly ME. Like I said, Nitro didn’t drink, but this night he came up to us and said he wanted to try some “Jage” just to see what it was all about. We didn’t want to see him hurt himself, but he insisted. About midnight, just when everything was starting to peak, the music blasting off the walls of the totally packed, smoke-filled, stinkin’ “Stain room,” people dancing, goin’ wild from the infectious sound and vibe of that Doorslammin’ wall of sound, my skull, just beginning to get blurry, now spinning, as I was starting to enter that hi-octane buzz that I loved so much, and right at that moment, while I was entering my flight, when the doors of the world of

the unknown and bizarre were just opening, Nitro came over to the mic and asked the bar maid for a shot of that dangerous juice—JÄGERMEISTER! A few minutes later, the waitress nonchalantly strolled up to the bandstand and very politely handed Nitro a shot. He very slowly took the glass in his huge, gritty paw as we all quietly watched. He then very cautiously and curiously examined it, thinking and wondering if this tiny little drink could untangle the mysteries of life and bring total bliss. I remember him smelling it, like a little kid smellin' brownies that his mom had just baked for him on a cold winter's day after school. He then very boldly downed the shot in one swift gulp. We all stared and wondered what would happen. Nitro just smiled and we kept on wailing. After we played the set, he told me he didn't feel a thing. Nitro was HIGH on LIFE! We were all VERY relieved. RIDE!

On his birthdays at The Saloon, he'd always have a pajama party. These parties were GREAT! The whole band and anyone and everyone would attend—wearing pajamas. The costumes you would see—absolutely HILARIOUS! This was BIG-BIG FUN. I guess you had to be there!



Johnny had a great sense of humor to say the least!

Johnny was always writing songs. Before I was with him, he penned "Dirty Dishes," which he sold to the great Albert Collins. Albert recorded it on his Alligator LP "Cold Snap." Johnny was extremely proud of this. The Doorslammers with Stu Blank went into Bayview Studios in Richmond to record some songs about 1989, but we never did anything with the tapes, unfortunately. We also recorded before that, but nothing was released—sad.

In 1990, we had a steady Monday night gig at Grant & Green. Nitro invited a guitar player who I didn't know from San Jose on this gig—with pay. I was pissed: I needed the money to help support my kids, and I didn't want to split the dough with an unnecessary player. I thought we sounded good enough as it was. Stu, by now, had left the band. Well, this new guy



opened up the show with the instrumental "The Hucklebuck," which back now and even then was being done by everybody—which irritated me. I didn't really want to play it. Then this new guy sang. Even then, I still just wanted the gold. But it didn't take too long before this new guy became a little brother to me and Nitro. Everyone just loved him. Tommy Castro! RIDE!

Then, the Doorslammers went through another amalgamation: Perry Welsh split and we got Andy Just from San Jose to replace him on harp and vocals. Andy was fine and we got along real good. He had a real good sense of humor and he understood us. One night, we



were doin' a gig at the big JJ's in San Jose. I don't have the time to tell the whole story, but I was really putting down the shots of "Jage" and I and accidentally hit a customer in the face when I threw my shot glass after taking a swig. MERCY! I was banned from JJ's, which didn't bother me, but poor Johnny was at the end of his rope over it! After the gig, he left me stranded in JJ's parking lot. A few hours later, he came back to pick me up. He was so upset with me. But he loved me; we were blues brothers.

Johnny was now getting into metaphysics. He started to do a lot of reading on it. Occasionally, he'd go to The Psychic Institute in Berkeley for lectures and to get free psychic healings. I was curious and he asked me if I'd like to go with him to check it out. He took me there and I really enjoyed it. I liked it so much that, after a couple of visits, I wanted to take some courses. That started me on my road to recovery.

About 4 months later, we made a live cassette tape for The Saloon label. The band got an offer to play in Italy, but we had to pay our way to get there. I had just finished writing a screenplay and thought I'd be able to sell it real fast and get rich. I told Johnny this and told him I didn't want to pay for the airfare to Italy. I was going to leave the band to pursue my screenwriting career. This hurt Johnny and me too. I just wanted to try something different. I thought writing screenplays would be real easy, easier than shedding blood in smoky nightclubs for hard-earned shekles. As I write this, I'm still tryin' to sell that script—MERCY!

Nitro kept going. We stayed friends. He had a new bunch of Doorslammers: Scotty was still on drums, but



he got AJ Kelly ("Cubby") on bass, and Tony Perez from the Dynatoners on sax and later vocals too. They recorded a CD that had a song Johnny penned entitled "One More Night." It ended up being used in a Hollywood movie named "Twisted" in 2004. Then Johnny married Silvia Cicardini. They bought a house out in Antioch, California. He asked me if I'd like to be the priest to marry them at their wedding. I told him that I never did that, but if they wanted me to, I would, and do it proudly. So, in 1993, Johnny and Silvia had a big wedding party at Blues on Lombard Street in San Francisco. I was pretty bombed, but I did the ceremony. Johnny later told me it was pretty weird, funny, and heavy all in one. I felt a bit foolish. Later, Silvia got in the Doorslammers as a singer and then she picked up the sax. For more than 10 years, they played and lived together—they even fixed cars together and welded stuff—a real team.

Then, in about 1998, Johnny had open-heart surgery. I was finally alcohol and drug free by this time. He wanted me at the operation for support along with Silvia, my partner Cathy Lemons, and Laura Gillespie, former owner of Lou's. He very bravely pulled through and was doing real good. Over the years, he'd occasionally call me to sub if his main bassist at the time couldn't do a gig. We always had fun, but nothing like the old days. It was still great to hear Johnny play and sing and tell the same old stage jokes that he'd be tellin' for all his Doorslammin' days.

Then, at our annual Christmas party 2 years ago at The Saloon, with Tommy Castro and all our old musician friends from the past, Johnny couldn't play the last show. He had to go to the hospital that night. I started to worry about him.

Nitro kept going. He now had three CDs out, but just like the economy in America, the blues scene was getting a bit thin. Grant & Green and the Lost & Found changed owners 10 years ago and stopped booking blues. Lou's started to hire top-40 wedding bands that played watered down blues for suburbanites. And now there was just one JJ's in San Jose, not three. Johnny and Silvia separated. There was stress. He put yet another Doorslammers group together. And he found a new love and was happy. Johnny, being the old soul that he was, didn't want to hold a grudge regarding Silvia. They were never formally divorced and occasionally Silvia and Johnny would do a gig together. They stayed close friends. Johnny now went back to living in his old room above The Saloon. He had his steady Friday and Sunday night gigs there, as always. He chose not to go out on the road to be a national act. He told me that people

from all over the world would come to San Francisco and The Saloon. Why go out on the road? Why leave when they come here?

On Saturday, February 19, 2011, at about 10 pm, I was heading in a car driven by my youngest son toward the Golden Gate Bridge into San Francisco. I was with three of my kids. We were leaving Mill Valley where we had spent the whole morning, day, and night at our dear friend's house. John Leslie Nuzzo's memorial service was held by his wife Kathleen that day. I was feeling very tired. As we were driving back into the City, I called Cathy Lemons to tell her we were on our way home. It was then that she told me that Nitro had died!

Johnny's heart gave out. A lady in North Beach that I've known for a long time told me that a few weeks before Johnny died, he told her he was having a lot of dreams. He told her that he believed that his mom wanted him to join her on "the other side." His mother had passed about 9 years ago. I thought back to the time that Johnny had told me about when he was at a party in North Beach and Janis Joplin was there. She was chompin' down a big ol' greasy baloney sandwich just dripping with mayonnaise, mustard, and pickles. Johnny asked Janis why she was eating the sandwich. She said "Well, you only live once and I'm gonna do what I want!" Well, this same lady told me that 2 days before Johnny left us, he ate a cheeseburger. He had diabetes and wasn't supposed to eat that stuff. RIDE!

Another time in the early '90s, he took a gig with his great hero, Albert King. We were booked for a gig at Larry Blake's. Nitro told me he was gonna do the Albert King gig and for me to hire another singer to fill in for him. I did (Cathy Lemons) and the owner was really mad. She wanted Nitro. She fired us all the next day. Johnny then told me "I'd do it all over again!" That was my Johnny!

During those last years, Johnny Nitro started teaching blues at The Blue Bear School of Music. That was great. But more importantly, he was always willing to give so many people who really weren't that talented a chance to play on a stage. He just loved to help people. He was that kind. He was always real honest with the money. And that goes a long way. I saw him 2 days before he passed. I was walking on Grant Street to Tom's record store to try and scarf up some money. Nitro was across the street in that ol' shabby coat of his and his old beat up sneakers. He looked at me with that loving face of his and started to laugh—like there goes the neighborhood! I waved to him, but didn't go over to him to rap because I knew I'd see him soon. We were to go to dinner Sunday



afternoon with our friend Julie. But that never happened.

On the afternoon of Saturday, February 19, 2011, my friend, “The Chicago Collector” Ron Butkovich, happened to walk by The Saloon. He called me later and told me that there was an ambulance and medics with Johnny up in his room and that he knew Nitro was in trouble. A crowd was there milling about waiting to see what would happen. When the medics carried Johnny’s dead body down those old stairs, they all cheered. It was like applause for the way he kept going with blues all those years—putting out night after night with all the grit and soul he could muster. The next night, we had a huge sendoff for Johnny in The Saloon, fronted by Tommy Castro. I’ve NEVER seen so many people—old friends and musicians packed into The Saloon. The line outside was the longest ever! People had to wait 2 Hucklebuck hours to get in!

I just can’t think of The Saloon and North Beach without Johnny Nitro—to never again see that red, loving, smiling mug of his, with his thin mischievous, lizardish slits for eyes that looked like old venetian blinds—blinds that hid what was brewing inside his strange, dark, room-like skull—all the while blasting his wailin’ guitar from the little Saloon stage and sending out huge beams and waves of electric blues passion all the way down Grant Street. I can hear his fog horn voice singing his blues and yelling to the crowd, “WE’RE JUST HERE DRINKIN’ TRIPLES, SEEIN’ DOUBLE, AND GETTING’ IN TROUBLE!” and “IF YOU HAD TOO MANY, HAVE 2 MORE! He DIDN’T EVEN DRINK! And his last words to the audience were ALWAYS “AND IF YOU’RE DRIVIN’—WILL YOU PLEASE, PLEASE, PLEASE HAVE A CAR!!!”

And to NEVER again see him piggin’ out in one of the little ol’ nasty greasy spoons on Broadway is pretty hard to imagine.

He loved the blues and making people happy. He spread the magic and spirit of the blues to so many people who never heard it before. North Beach and The Saloon will NEVER be the same. It’s the end of an era. We lost a dear, one-of-a kind, diamond friend. He was “The Mayor of North Beach” and the ambassador of blues for the whole Bay Area community.

Johnny is survived by his daughter Kirstin, his first wife Margaret, and his second wife, Silvia Cicardini.

Have a GREAT JOURNEY and say hi to Stu! We ALL LOVE you, Johnny Nitro! RIDE! OH RIDE!!!!

Many friends and Doorslammers from all over the world paid tribute to Johnny on March 30, 2011, at Club Fox in

Redwood City and will do so again on May 29, 2011, at Slim’s in San Francisco. For more information, go to “The Johnny Nitro Tribute Page” on Facebook [and see the poster for the event following this article].

Below are the comments from some Doorslammers we solicited for this article.

Lee Vilensky (I Was a Teenage Doorslammer)

Johnny “Nitro” Newton hired me for my first ever paid gig. It’s entirely possible that I would have never played music professionally at all had it not been for Johnny. My parents would have been fine with this, as they’d wanted me to be a podiatrist.

I first met John in 1983 through his roommate Bill, who I worked with at Starving Students Moving Co. in SF. Bill knew I messed around on the guitar and made regular mention of his housemate Johnny Nitro, who was a guitarist and led a band called the Doorslammers. One day, Bill asked me if I played bass because Johnny was always looking for sub bassists. Inexplicably I answered, “yes, yes I did play bass.” This was a lie. I didn’t own a bass, or bass amp, or bass speaker cabinet and had never played a bass in my life. I once held one in my hands in 8th grade, but it was unstrung. I said “yes,” then forgot about it, thinking the matter was over.

Bill had given Johnny my phone number, informing him of the fine bassist he knew at work and Johnny called me to discuss possible bass work. I told Johnny that I didn’t play bass, didn’t own a bass, or bass amp, or cabinet, and could barely play guitar. Instead of being angry, or at least (and understandably so) dismissive, Johnny asked me what I did know. I told him that I listened to a lot of Chicago blues and could play the bass lines that Muddy and David Myers played on the Chess recordings from the ‘50s. He said, “well that should work. Get a bass and call me sometime.” So I did. I bought a late ‘60s Vox bass and went to his house on Gates Street in Bernal Heights.

Our first rehearsal lasted 3 hours, 45 minutes of which was devoted to playing music. We played a shuffle, then a slow blues, which was a shuffle slowed down, then a “Shotgun” groove, which was a syncopated shuffle. All I, IV, V. The rest of the time, we talked, mostly about Johnny’s high school bands in Sacramento when he wore hot pants and did flips off the stage. Great stories. We hit it off fast and hard. I knew I wanted to play with this guy because I’d always wanted a big brother. The music part was actually secondary. Afterwards, Johnny drove me back to my apartment on Geary Street and told me to work on the stuff we’d gone over. His plan was to do

three or four more sessions at his house, then have me sit in on a song or two at a gig, then maybe half a set or so. After 6 months I could play a whole show with him if I felt up to it. This sounded fine to me.

A week later, Johnny called me and said he needed me to play a 4-setter with him at Harris's Town Pump at 18th and Mission. I thought he was nuts, or at least a little "off." I was not ready, musically or physically. The bass is a demanding instrument and requires tremendous stamina, plus I was scared, afraid to play in front of people. I didn't know what to wear. I explained all this to Johnny, and he said, "You only need to know three songs, slow, fast, and medium. Wear whatever you want." So I did. I wore tan corduroy pants, a green Hawaiian shirt, and black canvas shoes, and it was just right. Somehow, I got through the gig, and the one after it, and many more. The drummer liked me because I played simple. Simple was all I knew. Johnny could have used seven or eight other bass players, but he used me because we were friends and that meant something to him, and I played simple.

Four or five months down the road, we got a Sunday night gig at The Saloon in North Beach, the worst slot of the week, the gig for new, unproven bands. I was so nervous, I could barely breathe. I remember telling myself to inhale and exhale. This was Carnegie Hall to me, and compared to the joints we'd been playing, it was a huge step up. From 1983 to 2011, Johnny Nitro played that Sunday night gig at The Saloon, and it became the most popular night of the week. I was there for the first one and John was there for the last. I owe my whole career to Johnny Nitro, who gave me a chance, as he did with countless others. I do believe Johnny is now swingin' up in "Soul Heaven" with the Kings, the Count, the Duke, Prez. Fess, SRV, and my Uncle Henry, who owned a chicken farm just outside of Vineland, New Jersey.

Lizzard (Liz Scott)

Johnny Nitro was one of my oldest and closest friends in San Francisco. He put his blues wings around me and schooled me proper in the ways of Chess and Stax. I worked 6 nights a week and four sets a night in his band. He was the best band leader I ever had the privilege to work with. He taught me and countless others about Blues and Life. He was a great guitar player with a great sense of humor. A stinging Honey Dripper. One of the finest men I've ever known. He will be sorely missed but never forgotten.

Love you Nitro,
Love Always.

Perry Welsh

When I think of Johnny, here are some things that come to mind; a kind and gentle soul, a real bluesman, one of a kind, loved women, some of the best magical musical



moments of my life, North Beach icon, and most of all, just a real good friend. North Beach will

never be as good or the same without Johnny. He was well loved and will be missed by many. I don't pretend to know where your spirit goes when you die, but I'm sure Johnny's is in a good place. Rest in peace my friend and ride, daddy ride!

Tommy Castro

I never met anyone quite like Johnny Nitro in my life. He was a great musician with his own style of playing and singing. He was a good songwriter, a story teller, a teacher, a mechanic, car builder, guitar maker, collector, a psychic, a minister, a guru who left a large imprint on the planet and some of its people. The thing he liked to do the most was help musicians who had a burning desire to play to an audience. If a person had the right intention, and respect for his stage and maybe a little talent, he would allow them to come up and play with him and his band. He did this thousands of times. He would give advice and be as helpful as he could and all out of the goodness of his heart. There was no other motive. He helped me the same way when I showed up in North Beach in the late '80s.

He was a good friend to me, and we had soooooo much fun playing together over the years. He and Ace taught me how to riiiiiiiide!!!! I doubt that I would have a career without their influence on me at that time. The 1966 black Strat I played for 20 years was Nitro's. He sold it to me for a very good price because that was all I could afford and I really wanted it. It was loaded with soul and grease before I ever played it. I love that guitar. It will always be a connection to my brother, Johnny Nitro, whose soul and spirit live on through grateful cats like me and through the music we play in his honor.

Shad Harris

John "Johnny T Nitro" Newton, was my friend. Some people knew him longer than I did and some not as long;

I met him in the latter part of 1987. We weren't instant friends, but we found common ground to build on...when I cut loose my day job and went back to full-time work/playing for a living, Johnny gave me spot gigs with the Doorslammers, and hooked me up with all the guitar front men. I met most of the musicians in the San Francisco blues scene because of Johnny Nitro. I could go on and on about how Johnny Nitro was this and that and most of it would be the stuff you'd expect to hear about anyone who is as gracious and kind-hearted as he was. I knew John the person, but I KNOW John's spirit. He was a good person, one of the best in my book; I will miss him, but I won't be sad, because I know his spirit.

He was so in love
With his new girlfriend
He was as happy as I'd ever seen
He played his last gig
Friday night at The Saloon
He went upstairs to his room
Happy and madly in Love
and went to sleep.

John "Johnny T for Trouble Nitro" Newton
September 2, 1951 - February 19, 2011
Continue in Peace My Brother, until we meet again...

Tony Perez

I stood next to him on stage for 7 years and watched him systematically open the gates of hell whenever he wanted. Which was always. He'd show up to the gig on



a wave of salt and axle grease with slicked back red wire hair and a snagged grin, and always with some Nitro in his glycerin. A tattered Fender

amp would be scraping along behind him as he lumbered in and a weathered guitar bag would be slung on his Hawaiian shirt of the night. These things were surely to be fueled by the flicker in his eye that had the single intent of blasting the bejesus out of everyone! Which he would.

Many wanted to cop his secrets: "Just how did Johnny build the state of Texas into his amp?"

What were the secret settings on his amp, and how and why was he hiding them? Was it W10-40 or 90 weight motor oil under his fingernails that added the greasy sting to the already smokin' hot riffs? Had he really made a deal with 'you know who' after all?"

But Johnny had no secrets. He'd just show up with his heart wide open and sing out with all his might.

Night after night after night.

He taught us all that that was all it took to streak the heavens - or to cleave the levels of hell. It was all the same to him.

He was a Racer 5 that forced you to red line just to keep up.

He was a single malt mash that loved everyone - and you were next!

Johnny didn't take his guitar to the world, he let the world come to his guitar - one gig at a time - and North Beach and The Saloon will never be the same without him.

We have all lost a living legend.

May his spirit live on in the thousands that he mentored and influenced - I can only hope that I am one.

All my love to you my long-time friend. May you rest in peace.

Rick Sankey

Like a lot of people, I knew Nitro a lot of years. but I didn't start to know him well 'til I started workin' with



him on a regular basis 3 or 4 years ago. A couple things stand out and I'll always remember

them. Once, on one of our breaks at The Saloon, he was talkin' to someone when one of the local homeless women came panhandlin' by...a soul we'd all seen many times, tiny, thin, limping, shattered. She approached Johnny and this guy with her hand out. Johnny swept her up in his left arm, hugged her, rocked her, and kissed her head time and time again. She asked for a dollar and got a mountain of love. The other thing about Johnny that may surprise a lot of people; he loved Broadway, not just funky Broadway, but BROADWAY. He once went through "Music Man" with me song by song, filling in the plot as he went along. I can still hear him "seventy six trombones in the big parade..." I'll always remember Nitro as a fine player who had a great knack for livin' a song with ya right there on stage. He did a great version

of "It's Open House at My House." He could be a very tough character too, don't dare try to come on stage uninvited; but what I'll remember most is him huggin' me, laughin' at one of my few successful jokes, and tellin' me he loved me. I'll always love ya back, Mr. Nitro.

Burton Winn

People have said about Johnny Nitro that he didn't have to go out and see the world; the world would come to him. At the end of the last Friday night I played with him, his last Friday night at The Saloon, while waiting to get paid, I found myself in the middle of a conversation between him and a guy named Dan. Dan was a big guy and seemed to be one of the "regulars," a Saloonatic even, as he was there so often. Dan was saying how much he enjoyed coming to hear the band; there was nothing like that where he was from. He commented to Johnny that he didn't do his original song "Dirty Dishes," the one made into a blues hit by Albert Collins. Johnny said, "I haven't played it much recently. But if I only remember one thing about my life, it would be the time I was in the audience and heard Albert Collins do that song at the San Francisco Blues Festival." I thought it strange he would define his life at that moment in front of Dan and me; I guess he knew Dan pretty well. I asked Dan, "Are you from around here?" He said, "No, I'm a pilot

from Canada and when I have a layover in SF, I always come here." The world was Johnny's oyster. His pearl was The Saloon.

Johnny Ace is still wailin' away with the blues and can be reached on Facebook or at <http://www.lemonace.com>.

Photo credits and information:

p. 14, column 2: Ace Archives. Promo photo, 1989.

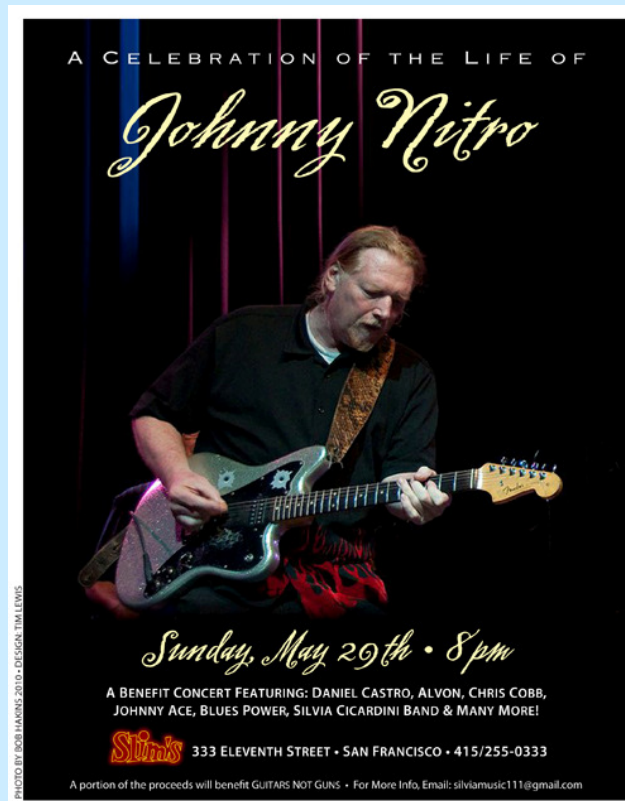
Personnel: Scott Rabino, Perry Welsh, Johnny Nitro, Stu Blank, Johnny Ace.

p. 15, column 1, top: Ace Archives. Nitro's Pajama Party at The Saloon, 2001. Personnel: Johnny Nitro and Silvia Cicardini; *column 1, bottom:* Photo: Kamela Arya. The Saloon, 1996; Personnel: Tommy Castro, Johnny Nitro, Johnny Ace.

p. 15, column 2: Ace Archives. Private party, 1991, Las Vegas, Nevada. Personnel: Scott Rabino, Johnny Ace, Johnny Nitro, Andy Just.

p. 18: Photo: KB Murray. San Francisco, 1989. Personnel: Perry Welsh, Johnny Nitro, Johnny Ace.

p. 19, column 1: Ace Archives. Promo photo, circa 1994; Personnel: Tony Perez, AJ Kelly, Jamie Lease, Johnny Nitro; *column 2:* Photo: Tina Lewis. Johnny Nitro and The Doorslammers, 2011. Personnel: Burton Winn, Johnny Nitro, Cathy Tejcka, Rick Sankey.



A portion of the proceeds will benefit Guitars Not Guns. For more information, contact Silvia Cicardini at silviamusic111@gmail.com.

"ON THE AIR" WITH KATHLEEN LAWTON

Interview by Joseph Jordan



In our continuing series of bringing you the stories of radio professionals that bring us Blues over the airwaves, we have, in this issue, the unique pleasure of highlighting a disc jockey of tremendous Blues acumen and stellar personality. Ms. Kathleen Lawton was gracious enough to speak with us for a few minutes about what makes her crazy 'bout the blues.

TGGBS: *What are the call letters/location, radio*

frequency, times, and name of your show, and do you stream over the net?

KL: It's KCSM-FM; 99.1 FM around the Bay and 90.7 FM in the Sonoma Area and we're also on the web at kcsfm.org. We do stream live 24/7. The hours of my show, "Crazy 'Bout the Blues" which is on Friday nights, are 9 p.m. to midnight Pacific Time.

TGGBS: *When did you start your program?*

KL: I started in 1988. KCSM has actually been fantastic with me. They've allowed me complete freedom to do what I want. I'm able to play and fiddle around with the music the way I want. There are no playlists. The only rules are that we're a 24/7 jazz station and so I always bear in mind that jazz is the focus of our station. I try not to get into, shall we say, the rock elements of the blues, 'cause much of that music can be found on other stations. The more "rock and rock-star" blues can be found on some of the other commercial FM stations. Ours is a commercial free station and is largely listener supported and we have pledge drives a few times a year. All of those reveal things about our listeners, what they are interested in, and what they like and what means something to them. Of course, it means a lot to us to have that kind of support and feedback from people.

TGGBS: *What kind of support do you receive from your listening audience?*

KL: The funny thing about radio is that you're alone in a room with a microphone, and some elements of it are really wonderful. It's like you're talking to an intimate friend. It's also like you're talking to no one. Sometimes I think, 'I wonder if there is anybody out there listening?' I get occasional emails and phone calls and letters (from listeners) and things like that. It's very, very, very reassuring to hear from people, to hear what the blues means to them, to hear what the music means to them, and the role it plays in their lives, actually.

TGGBS: *What do you feel is unique about your approach to your show?*

KL: I think everyone stamps their show with their own personality and their own likes and dislikes— and the night, the time of day the show is on—at the time of their lives it is on. I let my thing happen kind of organically. I just go in there and think, 'all right, I'll just get into a groove and see where it goes.' The great thing about KCSM is I have the freedom to do longer sets, so if I want to move faster and think, yeah that music goes great to there, but I want to do a little more to ease it down or ease it out or ease it up or whatever I want to do, that's how I'll do it, so I try to do it kind of organically. I try to catch the essence of the music, really, the flow and the rhythm. You don't want to stop at a certain point, you want to go a little bit further or, oh, now would be a good time to stop. That kind of thing. For me, one of the important things is to get the variety, 'cause if you play the 12-bar blues all the time, people would be really bored and they would tune out. So what you have to do is try to make it interesting. It's kind of like a smorgasbord, within the blues frame, but you can include anyone from Lonnie Johnson to Etta James to Clifton Chenier, you know with the zydeco sound, or some gospel... the sacred steel folk.

TGGBS: *How do you possibly keep track of the new artists sent to you on a regular basis by labels and publicity outlets?*

KL: Well, you listen to them. The first three tunes on a CD are really important, because you figure the artist is showing their best with number one, they're trying to give you a feeling of what's going to be on the CD. And if somehow or another you have a really great song hidden down at number 11, or 12, or 13, it's kind of too bad. What happens is you listen to the first few and you get sort of an impression. It's very hard to listen to every single CD all the way through. Sometimes what I'll do is listen to a little bit of each track, or if I can hear, this is not the sound or the style that works for me, or if it



doesn't fit in with the format of our station. A lot of them are very rock-oriented, so I don't think that is appropriate. Occasionally we'll do something that has a little more rock in it, but that's [included] in with a lot of Chicago blues, Piedmont blues, or Mississippi or West Coast. I try to balance it out.

TGGBS: In doing "Crazy 'Bout the Blues," what are some of your joys?

KL: The greatest joy is the music. Somebody phoned me up years ago and said, 'Do you actually like the blues?' and I said, 'Well, if you really want to know the truth, I'm crazy 'bout the blues.' Because I am and have been for as long as I can remember, even though I didn't know what it was, hearing that sound as a kid, and I thought, 'Oh, what's that? That's great.' And inch by inch, bit by bit, you sort of pick it out and learn. But the greatest joy is the music itself, and then knowing there are people out there that are on the same track, on the same wavelength. The music, I find, has a very, very healing power. It's kind of like a drug in that it takes you to a different place; no bad side effects, and you feel great afterwards. The blues is not a downer; it can be very energetic, it can be very funny, it can make you laugh, it can make you get out a lot of your emotions. It is an emotional release. I think not just for me, but for the many people who listen to it. I've had phone calls from [for instance] a woman who said she was treating a relative who had cancer and she listened to the blues and found out how much it had helped her. I know what it does for me, and I'm sure there are plenty of people out there who are like that, who are going through whatever it is in their life, or just their day-to-day life. What I really love about the blues is the wit and the irony about it. You can have a music that has rhythm and passion, a lot of feeling, a lot of emotion, and still a sense of humor.

TGGBS: How do you think your show has changed over the years, and what do you hope to do that you might not have done yet?

KL: We were having interviews for a while and then we had a major construction site at the station and haven't been able to have them. Now we're able to get interviews back and I love doing them. It's kind of hard to get artists on a Friday night that don't have gigs or artists that are touring to come in. But we've had plenty of people come in over the years, and it is a lot of fun to get artists to come in, open up and talk about themselves, relax and play some music, sing or play live on the air, which is a great thrill for listeners 'cause that doesn't happen too much with radio anymore. So that's

part of the joy in what I do. In terms of where it is going to go... well, as I said, it's always been kind of organic for me. It moves according to the sounds. I always try to take some old sounds I want to make sure people get to hear, 'Oh, yeah, Mississippi John Hurt' or one of the really old guys. I had somebody phone up one time and say, 'Wow. Who was that guy Howlin' Wolf you just played? I never heard him.' And that was a thrill for me, to introduce somebody to Howlin' Wolf, that might change her life, in many ways, we don't know. It all comes from the music. When you find somebody new, it's great to play them. It's great to have somebody come into the studio and to talk. One of the great things about radio is that you can do it until you're 9,000-years old and I sincerely hope to do it until they shovel me into the ground 'cause I'm having a fantastic time.

TGGBS: What are the names of a few musicians, old or new, that you feel need more recognition or are there any favorite artists or up and comers that have caught your ear?

KL: I personally feel none of the blues people have ever gotten the recognition they deserve. They've played such a fundamental role in American and, actually, international music because they have affected many other countries. The British rock groups during the '60s bowed to and acknowledged the blues folks, but a lot of artists don't know now, until they go back a bit, 'Oh, so it was Buddy Guy, it was Muddy Waters, it was Howlin' Wolf, Lonnie Johnson, one of the great ones, Charlie Christian, one of the great ones.' None of them, to me, have ever gotten the recognition or probably the money they deserve either. I would like to see that census corrected in a better universe, but I'm not sure it is going to happen. In regard to the new artists, I'm always looking for a sound that is very intense emotionally. I'm looking for a really good and kind of raw vocal. I like to have the emotions kind of jumping out at you, and a great tight band. To get all that stuff together isn't all that easy. Sometimes people are lacking the voice or sometimes the key instrument, or whatever it is. Or the band isn't quite together. Somebody I've really enjoyed that's based locally is Alabama Mike. His last CD was really great and it's got its own sound and it's got a great lineup of local folks on the album too. There are some wonderful artists out there. In the blues, quite honestly, most of them do not get the recognition they deserve. That's my gripe about all of that. You get a much lesser talent getting a lot of recognition, a lot of money, and a lot of fame, where as a blues person who has three times as much doesn't really receive it. I'd like to see that



change. I don't know how we can make it change, but maybe somebody out there has some great ideas.

TGGBS: *You were kind enough to judge a recent blues contest that The Golden Gate Blues Society held to send a band on to Memphis to compete in the Blues Foundation's International Blues Challenge. What are your feelings about the ultimate Bay Area winner, Tip of the Top, and are you invested in their chances?*

[Ed. note: This interview was conducted before the International Blues Challenge was held in Memphis.]

KL: The Bay Area has so much talent and I have to say, at that talent contest, virtually everybody there could have represented the Bay Area beautifully. It was trying to choose between many, many superb talents (Tip of the Top, Wendy DeWitt, Twice as Good, J.C. Smith Band.) Obviously, with Tip of the Top, we're hoping for the Bay Area that they're going to make some sort of a wave. They are all very talented, they have a great tight sound, they're fun to watch on stage, so they have all of the components and I certainly wish them luck. *[Ed. note: Tip of the Top advanced to the semifinal round of the IBC. Read about that experience elsewhere in this newsletter.]*

TGGBS: *Want to get anything off your broadcast chest?*

KL: Nothing specifically. My taste isn't like everybody else's. Occasionally, I will play something and I'm thinking, 'I don't like that, I'm never going to play that again' and then I'll get a phone call from somebody who'll say, 'Wow, that was the greatest thing you ever played,' so it's very humbling and it makes you aware that, okay, this is just my opinion. I do this show my way. However, there is something I would like to say to all

people who are making recordings, CDs, and that is this: 'Please name and number all of your tracks on the back and give the times and name them clearly.' Sometimes people try to do artistic things where they name the tracks in a circle or in funny lettering, and they don't give the time or other info. Boy, it would sure make things easier for blues programmers or musical programmers if they did. It sounds very basic, but you'd be surprised how many people don't do it.

TGGBS: *How do you feel a blues society can assist musicians and its members?*

KL: Oh, in a million ways; just what happened as a result of the blues competition a couple of months ago, for example. It is absolutely important that musicians can have a forum, an extended family. Musicians very often they don't always hear other musicians. They get out and they do their gig and sometimes they have a day gig and they're busy and they have regular lives too, and so they don't get a chance to be in any kind of environment where they can really see the blues nurtured. Blues societies like TGGBS are wonderful for that. [President] Dorothy Hill and all the people who have done so much to put this all together are just absolute gems, that I don't think we, who love the blues, can thank people like that enough for preserving this, 'cause this is the kind of music that's going to be around a long time after we're gone. We really owe it to people who have worked to preserve this sound and this spirit.

TGGBS: *Is blues part of your day-to-day life?*

KL: Yes. Blues is the background music in my head and in my heart.

VIDEO LINKS

by Bobbi Goodman

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NpikCzqlDbk> – Twice as Good with Alvin Draper sitting in after TGGBS meeting at Angelica's Bistro in Redwood City on April 3, 2011; great combo!

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fUYXGp7sus4> – Twice as Good performs after TGGBS meeting at Angelica's Bistro in Redwood City on April 3, 2011. They had the joint jumping!

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tecn2seo2gQ> – Alabama Mike at fund raiser at the Club Fox in Redwood City to send Tip of the Top to Memphis for IBC.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nshA22H2vTg> – Tip of the Top at fund raiser at the Club Fox in Redwood City to send them to Memphis for IBC ... they did us proud!

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WTVEprXw-Dw> – Bluestate at fund raiser at the Club Fox in Redwood City to send Tip of the Top to Memphis for IBC.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nyVet2l0FQE> – Local favorite and TGGBS member Amy Lou with the Candy Kane Band at The Poor House Bistro in San Jose, CA. Candy Kane has a lead role in the TGGBS-supported United by Music project slated to take off in the Bay Area this year.



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Redwood City, California**



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6:00pm
Earl Thomas**

**Saturday:
11:00am
Blues Cadillac
John Le Conqueror
Tip of the Top
Ron Hacker**

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Mark Hummel with Nathan James
Alabama Mike and the 3rd Degree
Johnny Rawls**

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Sequoia Healthcare District, Krefeld's Awards, First National Bank, Redwood City Cultural Commission, Peninsula Sunrise Rotary, Lyngso Garden Materials, See's Candies, Sequoia Hospital

I CAN'T HEAR YOU KNOCKING

by Joseph Jordan



Do you ever have “ringing” or “buzzing” (tinnitus) in your ear(s) or a “noise hangover” after attending a live concert or nightclub gig? Do you sometimes have trouble hearing a friend talk in a noisy restaurant or any loud environment? Do your ears ever “hurt?”

Those signs and many other auditory problems can be indications you’ve suffered permanent hearing loss. Yeah, folks, permanent!

Although tinnitus is common, with about one in five people between 45 and 65 years old reporting symptoms on general health questionnaires (overall aging can be a factor as well), once noise-induced hearing loss from live music or audio stimulus from ear buds, headphones, or car stereo systems is experienced, it does indeed last forever.

A list of performers who have publicly volunteered information about their hearing loss include such notables as Eric Clapton, Neil Young, Jeff Beck, Bono, Will.i.am, Ozzy Osbourne, and literally hundreds of others. Even softer-playing musicians, such as James Taylor, Barbra Streisand, and Phil Collins and jazz musicians Al Di Meola and Herbie Hancock have suffered hearing damage... damage that will never go away.

Referring specifically to musicians, California-based music industry audiologist Lisa Tannenbaum, of Musicians



Hearing Services, has said, “If you frequently work or play music in a high-decibel environment, you’re at risk for a number of problems: ear and vocal fatigue, hearing loss, tinnitus, hypersensitivity to sound, shifts in pitch perception, and sound distortion.

However, music-induced ear and hearing problems are preventable. As a musician or someone who loves being around music, your ears are, arguably, two of your most valuable possessions.”

A short list of people-at-risk from unnatural levels of noise exposure may include bartenders, gig support staff, fans, and, especially, players. Even classical music can be deafeningly loud. Surprisingly, “band” musicians most at risk are orchestra members, due to the huge volumes of sound experienced while playing with scores of other musicians.

Local Bay Area blues musician and guitar shop owner



Chris Cobb comments, “I’ve been playing since I was 15 and I used to play a whole lot louder than I play now. I am sure that’s where [hearing loss] is from, playing real loud rock in the ‘70s and ‘80s. I’ve been tested for hearing loss and I have what they call “pilot’s notch.” Airplane pilots get the same thing

where, at a high-to-mid frequency, it dips way down. That’s the frequency that I’ve lost.

I have to say, ‘what’ a lot when I’m talking to people, and ambient noise is a problem. If I’m trying to listen to one thing and there’s something going on in the room, that other thing will drive me crazy and seep into my hearing. Something about my hearing loss will let those ambient noises ‘get in’ and cause more distress.

I now play quieter the last 15 years, that’s the number one thing I’m doing. The other thing I’m doing is I get my hearing tested regularly to make sure it’s not getting worse and if I’m going into a situation where I know it’s going to be loud, I make sure I wear ear protection. I have custom-made musician’s hearing earplugs for that purpose.

If the volume feels uncomfortable, you’ll know it when you feel it. If it’s starting to feel unpleasant, get something in your ears.”

There persists today a stigma among many players, fans, and industry professionals to mention this auditory disaster. There shouldn’t be. It is imperative that people protect their ears from loud noises, whether that be from, just to mention a few, an emergency vehicle’s siren, a jackhammer, or even an electric hair dryer.



Guitar whiz Joe Satriani recently said, "A lot of people don't realize it, but you really can damage your hearing very quickly (by) being exposed to very loud music. You need to save your ears to know what things really sound like."

Almost 25 years ago, a remarkable San Francisco-based musician set out to do something about alerting musicians, fans, and club/concert workers to the potential dangers of loud music.

Kathy Peck has worked within the music industry for decades, but at an enormous personal price. She played for years with one of the country's seminal punk bands, the all-female power trio, The Contractions. As a direct result, she discovered well over 20 years ago that she suffered a major loss of hearing in both ears and, after using hearing aids and learning to lip-read, she found she needed a highly delicate operation to make up for that degeneration of normal auditory function. With all of that, she still struggles with her hearing.



Most days of the week, Kathy can be found in the cozy office of her Victorian flat in San Francisco's Western Addition testing for ear damage and, especially, helping to customize formfitting musicians' earplugs and ear monitors for her many clients. She's helped literally thousands of musicians and industry workers become aware of, and protect against, further devastating hearing loss. The custom earplugs she helps design are exactly fitted for an individual's ears and, when used, will lessen or eliminate potential damage to peoples' hearing ability and, importantly, maintain the quality of the sounds heard.

In 1988, Peck cofounded and is now the Executive Director of the nonprofit hearing health organization,

H.E.A.R., which is an acronym for Hearing Education and Awareness for Rockers, to spread the word among musicians and fans about hearing protection. With support from the music and medical industries, foundations, and individual donors, H.E.A.R. is helping to raise awareness of the real dangers of repeated exposure to excessive noise levels from music. The Who's Pete Townshend gave H.E.A.R. its founding donation and touted the organization in a *Rolling Stone* magazine interview, while discussing his own debilitating hearing loss. And the father of the modern electric guitar, the late Les Paul, fully endorsed Peck's work.

Peck now spends her days informing the public about hearing loss, lecturing classrooms of students and writing articles for various magazines and journals about the auditory danger of loud music. In 1989, Peck received the National Leadership Award from the National Council on Communicative Disorders in Washington, D.C. for her pioneering efforts in hearing loss education and prevention advocacy.

For most of us, walking away from music is not an option...and giving up something so intrinsic to ourselves does not have to be the way to go. We must always remember, though, that hearing does not "recover" from damage. Exposure to excessively loud music from even one club gig can make a difference in future hearing integrity.

The Golden Gate Blues Society urges you in the strongest possible way to get your hearing checked and to ALWAYS wear protective earplugs during live shows. (Napkins won't do it, folks.) The quality of the sounds you hear from this day on depends on it.

Check out H.E.A.R. at <http://www.hearnet.com> or email Kathy Peck at hear@hearnet.com or call 415-409-3277 for more information or, better yet, a private appointment. Lisa Tannenbaum can be contacted at 415-621-1185.



KID ANDERSEN: FROM HERRE TO GREASELAND

by Steve Cagle

From a February 28, 2011, interview at Greaseland (Kid's recording studio)



To an informed blues aficionado, the name Kid Andersen is synonymous with contemporary West Coast blues. Whether performing on stage, making music in the studio, or producing a record, Andersen has already placed his indelible stamp on the California blues scene, while he continues

building his distinctive musical presence across America and beyond. His accomplishments are impressive for a young musician who crossed the pond from Norway just 10 years ago, and his journey is just beginning.

Over the past several years, a resurgence in the popularity and public awareness of blues music has been happening unmatched since the '60s, when the British sparked a major revival by reintroducing the blues to America using rock as the means of delivery. The current renaissance is a global affair of far-reaching proportions, with advanced technology delivering blues music to and from all corners of the world. The British steadfastly maintained their station over the decades since the '60s thanks to the staying power of classic rock and the unwavering popularity of unstoppable juggernauts like Clapton and the Stones. Yet other countries are continually showing up on the blues map, ready to take their seats at the international table with Germany, France, Australia, the Netherlands, and Serbia, among many others.

Adding momentum to the burgeoning world market of the blues is the success and continued growth of the International Blues Challenge, created and hosted by the Memphis-based mothership, The Blues Foundation. This year's 27th IBC solo/duo and best harmonica winners hailed from Germany and France, respectively.

Before the changing face of the blues universe became a recognized worldwide phenomenon, a young Norwegian expatriate was already establishing himself as a contributing force in the center of that universe. During the past decade, Chris "Kid" Andersen has shared stage and studio with many blues legends, future legends, and lesser known journeymen while steadily raising the foundation for his own place in blues history.

Although he stands well over 6-feet tall with a sturdy athletic frame today, as a youth in the small Norwegian village of Herre in Telemark County, Chris hated sports and instead turned his sights and energy toward music. "Everybody was playing soccer all the time. But the older kids, the 14 and 15 year olds, were playing guitar. There was this big trend happening...everybody had an electric guitar. My second cousin, who was like my brother, was THE guy, the best of all those guitar players. He told me if I got a guitar he would teach me how to play."

His parents bought him a guitar for his 11th birthday. Chris picked up a basic chord book and listened to the early rock n' roll music of Chuck Berry and the Beatles. He was catching on fast, and within months had surpassed his cousin's skill level. "The defining moment when I knew I'd gotten better than him was playing the Beatles' song 'Day Tripper.' It was one of those songs you had to know, and everyone was playing it. My cousin and the others were playing the guitar line with two notes wrong. I told him he'd been playing it wrong and showed him the right way. After that, he just kinda gave up playing, and soon everyone had stopped and moved on. I was the only one who stuck with it."

Chris came from a musical family of sorts, but not in the traditional mold. His father had once played trumpet "and one of those Yamaha living room organs," and his grandfather had been a church organist for 57 years. "He got a medal from the king for holding down the job for so long." Although he wasn't surrounded by music in the home, Andersen had a knack for figuring out how to play instruments, starting with the piano and drums. He then would choose various school mates to flesh out his makeshift bands and teach them how to play their designated instruments.

"We had one kid who could only play one beat at a time on the drums. So he played one thing while another kid laid on the floor and played the kick. We did Chuck Berry, the Beatles, and some local Norwegian pop rock."

Chris's first real experience was with a local Baptist choir, the only thing in town at the time. He was invited to join them, which included taking occasional road trips to perform outside the regular church gigs. While on one of these tours, Chris heard a tape that the bass player brought along, a copy of Stevie Ray Vaughan doing "Texas Flood," and "it was all over after that."

The next step in his musical growth was attending a youth music program/seminar, where his guitar teacher was Morten Omlid, a seasoned blues player and currently a member of the popular Norwegian band Spoonful of Blues. Morten offered to provide Chris with individual lessons, so 12-year-old Chris would travel an hour and a half with his father for this unique opportunity. At the end of each lesson, Morten would give Chris a stack of albums with instructions to listen to and learn certain songs. "He gave me 'Born under a Bad Sign' by Albert King, some early T-bone Walker shit, Muddy, Howlin' Wolf, Chess compilations and 'Hold that Plane' by Buddy Guy. Except for Stevie Ray Vaughan, I was lucky to be sent straight to the original sources of this music."

At 12 years old, Chris was probably the youngest blues purist in Telemark County. It wasn't until his high school years that he would branch out and begin listening to rock, starting with the British blues of guitarists Clapton, Mayall, Green, and Taylor. Chris attended a music high school in the nearby town of Skien, where he got his formal education in an environment that was structured like college. His guitar teacher was something of a local Norwegian rock legend who invited Chris to join his Stones tribute band. "Instead of giving me homework, he gave me gigs. That was my education."

His musical taste was expanded further when he began working for a record store at age 17, a job that lasted for a year or two. "I would buy every kind of music imaginable. There wasn't any genre I wasn't into." Chris also took lessons from a Latin jazz guitarist in Oslo, a 3-hour train ride from his home. He ended up moving to Oslo after high school, working odd jobs and frequenting jams at clubs where he would play and hang out with musicians.

At 19 years old, Chris landed his first professional gig in Oslo, playing with R.C. Finnegan, who gave him the nickname "Kid." "He was an American dude, a songwriter who used to be a wrestling announcer in Amarillo, Texas. He lived in Norway since '87 and made his living as a songwriter. He had a bunch of hits in Norway. We did blues, soul, country music, a mixed bag of great American, real music. Then the Muddy Waters club opened in Oslo, and the band became the house band at that club."

The Muddy Waters club began to open doors quickly for Kid (as he was now known), and he began to meet artists and make connections with blues people. The club featured live music every night, yet with a limited local roster of blues bands from which to choose, they booked

American blues artists and brought them over for one to several week runs at the venue. The list of artists booked reads like a who's who of blues greats – Nappy Brown, Jimmy Dawkins, Willie "Big Eyes" Smith, Gary Primich, Homesick James, Kinky Friedman, Tail Dragger, and Eddie Kirkland were just some of the musicians that came to the Muddy Waters club and were backed by the house band with Kid on guitar.

"One time we did a 6-week tour with Big Bill Morganfield. We wouldn't just play at Muddy Waters. We'd take that act and travel around a little with it. Mostly clubs, some concert halls, festivals. We often had good crowds, but we had some total bust outs where we just played for the staff."

In the process, Kid gained a wealth of knowledge about playing real blues music that went beyond chord structure, lead runs, and lyrics. "Eddie Kirkland was of the tradition where there's no 12 bars. When he changed it, he changed it, and we got really good at following him. It was a great blues education. You can listen to records and read books, but all that goes out the window once you've got a living human being there."

From the time Kid began to play music, his dream had



always been to go to America. "I knew that was where the real shit came from. And to me, being the best blues guitar player in Norway was kinda like being the best

sushi chef in Russia." He increasingly saw the potential of his dream becoming reality as more American blues artists came over to play at the Muddy Waters club, creating a mental bridge to the clubs where it all began across the Atlantic. The first taste of that reality came with a visit from Homesick James.

"We did a week or two with Homesick. One night the owners of the club asked him, 'So Mister James, what do you think about the Kid? Think he's pretty good?' And he said to them, 'Send that little punk to my house for a couple of weeks and I'll teach him how to play guitar.' They were floored. 'Oh my God, he just invited Kid to come play with him!' So they got somebody from Delta Air Lines who was gonna pay for the flight.

"I just didn't think it was the right thing for me to do because I wanted to go there and actually have a gig, actually do something. He [Homesick James] lived in

Fresno. I hadn't been to America yet, but I knew I wanted to go to California cuz I'd gotten into some of the new guys like Junior Watson and I liked the West Coast sound. As cool as Fresno with Homesick James would've been, I wanted to come here to stay, get a gig, and make a living. I got held up on that offer too long and it never happened. Then there was Tail Dragger, who needed a guitar player too, but I was waiting for the right offer from somebody that I could rely on. Tail Dragger was great, Homesick James was great, but there's such a thing as 'too bluesy.' I was lookin' for something that was a little more sustainable."

That "somebody" turned out to be Terry Hanck, who had



come to Oslo with his Norwegian wife for the Christmas holidays and ended up playing at the Muddy Waters club. "I dug the music he was doing and he was a hell of a great guy to hang out with who I could relate to. So I kept beggin' him. 'Hey man, if you need a guitar player, think about me.' I really wanted to go

to California, but he had another guitar player who was gonna come to California to work with his band, so it wasn't happening. Then something happened and it fell through while Terry was in Norway. So he called me the day after New Year's 2001 and said 'Hey were you serious? Cuz it turns out I need a guitar player.'" And I was like 'Yeah!'

The deal was that Kid would pay his own way to America (the earlier sponsorship deal with Delta had died on the vine some time back) and Terry would find him an affordable and convenient place to live. With minimal luggage and a single electric guitar, Andersen crossed the pond and landed in Santa Cruz, California. Hanck had arranged for him to rent a room from booking agent Michelle Rossi, an ideal situation because she would book gigs for Kid with Terry and with traveling bands needing a pickup guitarist when playing in the vicinity.

"The first couple of months in America were kinda tough because I didn't know how anything worked. I didn't know what food to order or how to go get simple shit. They'd ask 'Soup or salad?' I'd say 'yeah, that sounds good.' One thing I noticed is that in America, you can't go into a bar and order a beer. You have to tell them what kind. America wasn't exactly how I pictured it, but now I would have to say it's better."

One of his first musical endeavors was a recording session with Terry Hanck and one of his idols, Junior



Watson. Since Watson was handling the guitar chores for the session, the accommodating multi-instrumentalist settled into the role of bass player. This was his first hands-

on involvement in producing an album, a skill he developed and mastered quickly. "I got started producing with Terry's album "I Keep Holdin' On" and ended up producing his next two albums, "Night Train" and "Always." For his records, I'd be the link between Terry, who knew what he wanted, but didn't always articulate, and the engineer, who needed to know in order to get there. I got my first mixing boards from a friend who was a janitor at a radio station and was in charge of getting rid of old equipment."

Through his landlord/booking agent Michelle, Kid met Peter Brown, guitarist for the band Swing Shift, who



needed a bass player for a local gig. They became friends and Brown, who also ran the Blue Soul Records label, encouraged Kid to record a solo album. They assembled a band of Bay Area veterans

Kedar Roy on bass, pianist Sid Morris, and current Terry Hanck guitarist Johnny Cat. To play drums, they flew in Kid's former drummer, Martin Winstadt, from Norway. "It was my first record so I needed someone whose opinion I could trust."

Recorded at engineer Alan Goldwater's Magic Sound Studios in Santa Cruz, "Rock Awhile" also featured Terry



Hanck on several tracks, as well as guest turns by harmonica player Mark Hummel and Kid's "guitar hero" Junior Watson. "It turned out they were in town for the 'Harmonica Blowout' at the Catalyst, so I invited them for an impromptu jam session in the studio and ended up recording those songs too."

Back in Norway, people who knew Chris were amazed that he had an album out after just 2 years in the states,

and he acknowledged that he never would have done that record without Peter.

Andersen had become good friends with drummer June Core, as both lived in Santa Cruz. Kid had seen June drumming with Little Charlie and the Nightcats in Norway, and now he was playing with Charlie Musselwhite. When Charlie needed a guitar player, June recommended Kid, who sent a CD to the legendary



harmonica player at his request. He got the gig and ended up playing in Musselwhite's band for 4 years, in addition to recording the multi-award winning "Delta Hardware" album with Charlie. During that time, Kid released

three more solo albums: "Guitarmageddon" in 2005 with Junior Watson and Norwegian guitar hero Vidar Busk, as well as June Core; the 2006 concept album "Greaseland," with a guest appearance by Musselwhite; and 2007's "The Dreamer," with another guest turn by Musselwhite, as well as Rick Estrin and Andy Santana.

After 4 years, Kid decided to make a change and parted ways with Musselwhite. He initially planned to start a band with Bay Area soul singer/harmonica player John Nemeth, whose career had begun to take off after the success of his first two albums, and whose next album would be produced and engineered by Andersen. However, the project never came together and Kid was left without immediate plans for his next career move. The next turn of events came unexpectedly and at the right moment.

"I was drinking a lot at the time, so I called Rick Estrin to ask for his advice. He had stopped [drinking] when I was about 4 years old. I was married and living in Sacramento for about a year, and I had hung out with Rick a lot. Our women were friends and we had toured together with our bands. I knew Rick well, and he was making a solo album I was recording. I was always impressed with how he seemed to be the least handicapped of everyone I knew who had given up drinking. He didn't seem to be socially impaired; quite the opposite actually. He sort of became my idol in that respect.

"So when I wanted to quit [drinking], I called Rick and told him what was going on. We talked about it for awhile and then he mentioned that Little Charlie had just

announced he was leaving the band [Little Charlie and the Nightcats]. So, in the same conversation, he offered 'What do you think about starting a band together?' That was a real serendipitous phone call!"

Kid is working with Rick, J. Hanson, and Lorenzo Farrell on new material for the follow-up album to 2009's



critically and commercially successful "Twisted" by Rick Estrin and the Nightcats. He recorded and plays on tracks from Paul Oscher's latest

album "Bet on the Blues," and is wrapping up Terry Hanck's Delta Groove Records debut "Look Out!" due out this summer. He's been happily married to vocalist Lisa



Leuschner Andersen for over a year. His production credits continue to grow and his recorded and live performances elicit enthusiastic acclaim. And

that's just the first 10 years in America for Chris "Kid" Andersen, a true American blues artist.

Photo credits:

p. 27: Photo by Bob Hakins

p. 28: Photo by Dorothy L. Hill

p. 29, column 1: Photo of Terry Hanck by Deb Lubin

p. 29, column 2, top: Photo of Junior Watson and Kid from Kid's MySpace page

p. 29, column 2, middle: Photo of Lois and Peter Brown by Su Wong

p. 30, column 1: Photo of Kid and Charlie Musselwhite from Kid's MySpace page

p. 30, column 2, top: Photo of Kid and Rick Estrin by Dorothy L. Hill

p. 30, column 2, bottom: Photo of Kid and Lisa by Rachel Kumar.



Join us for an incredible evening of music benefiting Redwood City's own veteran drummer, Jimmy Sanchez, recently diagnosed with adult onset hydrocephalus. All proceeds go to ensure that Jimmy will receive the medical care he needs, so he will be able to continue sharing his unique blend of tasteful drumming that has moved audiences for the past 40 years.

Tuesday, May 3, 2011, 7:00 pm

VIP Advance tickets - \$15. NO WAITING IN LINE! Advance tickets can be purchased online only. A separate entry door opening at 6:00 p.m. will be available for advance ticket holders.

General Admission - \$10 at the door (not online). Doors will open for General Admission at 6:30 p.m.

The house band for the evening will be led by guitarist extraordinaire Garth Webber (formerly with Miles Davis, Gregg Allman, Bill Champlin, Kingfish, Dr. John). For this event, he brings a truly all-star band of some of the Bay Area's finest musicians, and joining them will be many special guests - Jimmy's friends. **We've listed a few on the poster, but be prepared for an evening of wonderful surprises because Jimmy has a LOT of friends.**

To make a donation to The Jimmy Sanchez Medical Fund, use Paypal and send money to JPSMedicalFund@gmail.com using the Gift option under the Personal tab. To learn more about hydrocephalus, please visit: <http://www.hydroassoc.org>.

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