

JAZZ & BLUES

DECEMBER
2009

F L O R I D A

FLORIDA'S ONLINE GUIDE TO LIVE JAZZ & BLUES



Selwyn Birchwood



Walker Smith



Bryan Lee



Jimmy Sweetwater



Rockin' Jake



*Cat
Shell*

Roy Rogers



Patti Wicks



Ted Howe



Dick Hyman



WINNING SPINS

By Bob Weinberg

JIMMY SWEETWATER'S BLUES ARE firmly planted in Florida soil. Although he was born in Massachusetts and now resides in San Francisco, the harmonicist and percussionist spent formative years around the Gainesville area. The rural environs, not to mention the opportunity to hear blues artists such as Willie Green and to pal around with rock and blues icon Bo Diddley, helped to inform the authentic feel of his country blues. With heroes such as Aleck Rice Miller (Sonnyboy Williamson II), Charlie Musselwhite and George "Harmonica" Smith, Sweetwater developed a gritty, down-home style that's short on flash and long on substance.

This sparse, soulful aesthetic is at the core of *Dirt Road by the Tracks*, Sweetwater's latest recording. Accompanied by the masterful Craig Ventresco on acoustic guitar, Sweetwater sings and blows harp in a laconic manner that conjures images of tree-lined, Northern Florida backroads with moonlight dripping off the moss. Of course, there's plenty of wit in Sweetwater's delivery, too. You can hear the sly wink of *Lightnin' Hopkins* in the opening "Mojo Hand," in which Sweetwater calls up the mix of humor and menace that was Hopkins' trademark. His mumbly baritone also brings to mind the late Texas blues legend, and his exaggerated phrasing will bring a smile to many blues lovers. (Also check out the hilarious video for the song, posted at Myspace.com/jimmysweetwater.)

Sweetwater and Ventresco engage in a couple of instrumentals, both of which were written by the pair. "Red Plays the Blues" provides an excellent showcase for Sweetwater's grits-and-moonshine chromatic harp. On "Washboard Blues," Ventresco displays an articulate finger-picking style that calls up ragtime and Delta antecedents as Sweetwater punctuates his playing with a variety of colors and textures pulled from his washboard, which is rigged with bells and cymbals.

Sweetwater's vocals stand out on a read of Willie Dixon's "Bring It on Home," and he seems to take inspiration from one of his main influences, Sonnyboy II. Ventresco lays down a chugging backbeat as Sweetwater works his vocals and harmonica into the loco-



JIMMY SWEETWATER

motive rhythm, blowing diatonic harp notes that belch smoke and recall the insistent rumble of iron wheels. The singer revisits his hero again on Sonnyboy's "Don't Loose Your Eye," in which his voice somewhat resembles the manic tenor of Ric Estrin.

Lonesome and image-laden, the title song is a masterful evocation of deep country blues. "The daylight ends where the iron meets the road," Sweetwater sings in his backwoods baritone. "The piles of dust in your mind, they're the heaviest load." Ventresco offers some of his finest picking here, echoing the emotions of the singer. Meanwhile, Sweetwater lays back in the mix with some subtle yet heartfelt harp blowing.

Sweetwater also personalizes Muddy Waters' "Deep Down in Florida," offering shoutouts to Tampa and St. Petersburg, as well as an Alachua County city that means quite a bit to him. "Yeah, I can't forget about you, Newberry," he sings, "that's where my little wife she come from." A tip of the hat is proffered to the late Brownie McGhee, as well, with a frisky read of the (barely) double-entendre

WINNING SPINS

“Key to My Door” and the original “Things Are Not Right,” which sounds like a Brownie and Sonny Terry romp but one that deals with modern issues such as global warming.

Closing out this gem of a recording, which just passes the 30-minute mark, a rendition of “(I’m Gonna) Move to the Outskirts of Town” does indeed change the address of this usually urbane tune. A favorite of Louis Jordan and B.B. King, the song finds a decidedly more rural residence thanks to Sweetwater’s textured harp and dark, misanthropic vocals, as well as Ventresco’s fine acoustic picking.

Dirt Road by the Tracks shows why Sweetwater has been a sought-after sideman in the Bay Area and beyond. His personality, as well as his seasoned chops, shine through on every track and leave listeners hungry for more.



Jimmy Sweetwater and guitarist Chet Honeycutt will perform Dec. 10 at Blue Jean Blues in Fort Lauderdale, Dec. 11-12 at the Hurricane Grille in Marathon, and Dec. 13 at The Green Parrot in Key West. Visit Jimsweetwater.com for more.

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**WALKER SMITH GROUP
BOSTON'S, DELRAY BEACH/DEC. 1
DAVE'S AQUA LOUNGE, ST. PETE/DEC. 4**

With his smoky, soulful tenor vocals and a sizzling guitar style rooted in Chicago blues, Walker Smith radiates charisma on the bandstand. But what truly distinguishes the Tampa bluesman is his superb original material, which can be heard on his 2006 recording *Ahead to the Past*. Splitting the difference between country and city blues, and traditional and contemporary forms, Smith pens lines like "she came like a storm and she left like a vapor" on "Blue," the chugging leadoff track to the disc. Songs like "County Line," "Flaga Ride" and "Open Road" reveal a taste for the highway, although Smith has been based in the Tampa area since 2001. Raised on the



South Side of Chicago, the blues prodigy was mentored by Muddy Waters, Buddy Guy, Jimmy Dawkins and Jimmie Lee Robinson, although Robert Cray seems to be the artist who comes to mind when first hearing him. The Walker Smith Group represented the Suncoast Blues Society at the 2007 IBC and won themselves the title of "Beale Street Blues Kings." **BW**

**SELWYN BIRCHWOOD AND DEUCES WILD
HARRY'S CIGAR & BREW, ORLANDO/DEC. 5**

"They got that Texas blues, man," Selwyn Birchwood related to the audience at the Orange Blossom Blues Society's Blues Challenge in October. "Chicago blues, Delta blues. There ain't no Florida blues. So I wrote 'em." Birchwood's assertion may be debatable—in fact, Florida musicologist Stetson Kennedy might have something to say on the subject—but there's no denying the huge gifts of the Orlando-based blues guitarist and songwriter. The OBBS certainly recognized his skills: The thunder-voiced singer and his Deuces Wild band will represent the Central Florida organization at the IBC in Memphis in January. Birchwood, who also wields a steely lead guitar that can conjure sweet



Memphis soul and deep Delta blues with equal fluency, also pens some excellent original material. The swampy, hard-driving "Florida Boy," with its musical and lyrical evocation of the Everglades and Birchwood's sawtoothed guitar lines, pays tribute to "the Sunshine State, [where] I was born and raised." Birchwood is currently working on a debut album. **BW**

An advertisement for AZ Kenny Tsak's album "56 Deluxe Like I Do". It features a photograph of a man and a woman. The man is wearing sunglasses and a patterned shirt, and the woman is holding a guitar. The text "NEW RELEASE!" is in yellow, "56 DELUXE" is in large black letters, and "LIKE I DO" is in large red letters. At the bottom, it says "AZ KENNY TSAK" and "www.56Deluxe.com".

An advertisement for "Jazz Impressions with Stu Grant". It features a photograph of Stu Grant, a man with grey hair, smiling. The text "JAZZ IMPRESSIONS" is in large blue letters, and "with Stu Grant" is in smaller blue letters. The WXEL logo is in the bottom right corner. The text at the bottom says "Saturdays 6:00-10:00PM on WXEL 90.7 and streaming live at wxel.org. Sponsoring Jazz Impressions is very reasonable. You'll reach a growing, sophisticated and upscale audience. Call 305.803.8656 for rates. You'll be pleasantly surprised."



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**ROCKIN' JAKE AND GABE BUTTERFIELD
BRADFORDVILLE BLUES, TALLAHASSEE/DEC. 5
PARADISE CAFE, PENSACOLA/DEC. 6**

SOUTHERN PINES BLUES & BBQ FEST, PERRY/DEC. 11-12
With a name like Rockin' Jake, you'd better be able to pitch a party. The St. Louis-by-way-of New Orleans harp blower does just that as he unleashes the arsenal of tones and textures that have made him a Crescent City favorite. Growing up in New England, Jake had a front-row seat to a jumping blues scene that included Roomful of Blues, Sugar Ray Norcia and Jerry Portnoy. Moving to New Orleans in 1990, the harp meister worked alongside area talents such as Mem Shannon and Eddie Bo, and also hit the road with Maria Muldaur. Jake helms his own bands as well, as can be heard on recordings such



as *5 p.m. Breakfast*, which captures a New Year's Eve gig at The Green Parrot in Key West. The hard-driving album includes walloping reads of blues classics as well as larupping Louisiana lagniappes. He'll be joined at the Southern Pines Blues event by Florida-based drummer Gabe Butterfield, son of influential harmonica man Paul Butterfield. **BW**

**BRYAN LEE
RUSTY O'REILLY'S, ORLANDO/DEC. 5
EARL'S HIDEAWAY, SEBASTIAN/DEC. 6**

Bryan Lee has long reigned as one of the kings of Bourbon Street. With his growly vocals and deeply rooted library of licks, the fire-fingered blues guitarist calls up everyone from T-Bone Walker to Albert King. To get a sense of how revered a performer he is, just scan the credits of his latest recording, *My Lady Don't Love My Lady*, which features guests such as Buddy Guy, Kenny Wayne Shepherd, "Sax" Gordon Beadle and Duke Robillard, who also produced the album. With his iconic wisp of cottony beard and jet-black shades—he's been blind since the age of 8—Lee cuts quite a figure, and, as Robillard says, "he bends that Telecaster's strings



like Superman bends steel." The guitarist also cranks out contemporary funk blues with the best of them. Lee was sidelined last month due to illness, but reportedly is back on tour with his Blues Power band. Check braillebluesdaddy.com for more info. **BW**

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TED HOWE TRIO
"AN EVENING OF DUKE ELLINGTON"
HARRIET HIMMEL THEATER,
WEST PALM BEACH/DEC. 14

Pianist Ted Howe's first CD was a Duke Ellington tribute, even though he didn't realize he'd recorded it for release. The 2005 disc *Ellington* was captured for a choreography rehearsal by a dance company, but the performances by Howe, bassist Neal Starkey and drummer Jerry Fields proved too strong to be denied a wider audience. The Ellington fixation of the Boston-born pianist, who became both a student and professor at Berklee College of Music, continues to enthral audiences. The ballet *An Evening of Duke Ellington with Ted Howe and The Ruth Mitchell Dance Theatre*, with



arrangements by Howe and choreography by members of the Alvin Ailey Dance Company, has since played to sold-out houses. "An Evening of Duke Ellington" has become an annual touring event, featuring a creative Latin arrangement of "Sophisticated Lady," a bluesy "Things Ain't What They Used to Be" and a classically tinged "In a Sentimental Mood." **BM**

FSU JAZZ FACULTY NEW YEAR'S EVE PARTY
B SHARP'S JAZZ CAFE, TALLAHASSEE/DEC. 31
 Cities with major universities tend to have the best music scenes, and those with more than one university, like Tallahassee, can be top-shelf. The FAMU Marching "100" Band may be the most prominent representative of Florida A&M University, but across town, Florida State University is led by the nationally acclaimed FSU Jazz Ensemble. And when the faculty that teaches the graduate and undergraduate students in that band gets together for a New Year's Eve party in town, musical sparks are bound to fly. The FSU College of Music faculty band is led by drummer **Leon Anderson**, associate professor and director of jazz studies. He's recorded with pianist and former



Wynton Marsalis sideman Marcus Roberts, who's also on the FSU faculty. Who'll show up and what they'll play will not be determined ahead of time, but other jazz faculty members include pianist William Peterson, saxophonist William Kennedy, trombonist Paul McKee and bassist Rodney Jordan. **BM**

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**ROY ROGERS & THE THE DELTA RHYTHM KINGS
KRAVIS CENTER, WEST PALM BEACH/DEC. 18
EARL'S HIDEAWAY, SEBASTIAN/DEC. 20**

Harmonica master Norton Buffalo likened Roy Rogers' slide-guitar attack to a "freight train without any brakes." And anyone who's seen the veteran California fret-skinner in concert can offer a hearty "amen" to the locomotive metaphor. The blues took hold of Rogers in his teen years, when his older brother brought home a Robert Johnson record. He went on to develop a funky and highly individual slide style of his own, which has been showcased since 1980 out front of his Delta Rhythm Kings. Rogers also produced and was featured on four albums by John Lee Hooker, with whom he toured, and recorded some exceptional



acoustic country blues with Buffalo, who lost his battle with cancer in October. *Split Decision*. Rogers' latest recording, is his first in seven years with the Delta Rhythm Kings and features his spark-throwing slide and emotional vocals on a dozen original roots rockers. His Kravis Center performance will benefit the Taras Oceanographic Foundation. **BW**

**CAT SHELL
RUM SHACK, LAKE WORTH/DEC. 4
SUNSET TAVERN, SOUTH MIAMI/DEC. 11
SCHNEBELY REDLANDS WINERY, HOMESTEAD/DEC. 18**

Boca Raton-based singer-songwriter Cat Shell's voice and compositional style recall those of crossover sensation Norah Jones—each performer seems to have an equal footing in pop, jazz and blues. A Peoria, Ill., native who's been in South Florida since age 7, Shell often moved to accommodate her father's radio career. The pain of relocation comes out in her songwriting, but her father also introduced Shell to early crossover stars Frank Sinatra and Nat King Cole. Shell's MySpace site (Myspace.com/catshellmusic) bears out similar stylistic diversity track by track. The sultry "After Midnight,"



from her debut independent CD, *Cat's Outta the Bag*, harkens back to bluesy-jazzy radio staples by the likes of Maria Muldaur. "Category 5" blends blues and pop with a Bonnie Raitt-like flair. And a video performance of "Just an Illusion," with guitarist Kevin Byrnes, bassist Brent Williams and drummer Jake Beal, mixes in the jazzy, understated influence of Diana Krall. **BM**

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**PATTI WICKS
WEST PALM BEACH LIBRARY/DEC. 4**

Like the late Shirley Horn, South Florida-based Patti Wicks possesses both a breathy singing voice and a highly personal piano style. Her latest recorded example, *Dedicated To...*, features her Italian rhythm section of bassist Giovanni Sanguineti and drummer Giovanni Gullino, plus guest saxophonist Scott Hamilton. Wicks' distinctive vocals shine on ballad arrangements of Ray Noble's "The Very Thought of You" and Rodgers and Hart's "Little Girl Blue," and her soloing matches that of the iconic Hamilton on an energetic reading of the Hammerstein/Kern standard "The Song is You." Perhaps South Florida fans will eventually understand what Italian fans already seem to



know—that Wicks' performances offer a rare and underrated blend of bebop-inspired humor and technique, plus a strong use of space and understatement. Look for monthly jazz performances at the new West Palm Beach Library through April. **BM**

**DICK HYMAN: TRIBUTE TO EDDIE HIGGINS
AMATURO THEATER/DEC. 9**

Pianist Dick Hyman may be best-known for his work on a dozen Woody Allen films, plus his ability to mimic nearly any other pianist. That talent will come in handy, and will be challenged, in Hyman's Tribute to Eddie Higgins for the Gold Coast Jazz Society. A longtime fixture on the South Florida jazz scene, Higgins died in Fort Lauderdale in August from lung and lymphatic cancer; he was 77. The late pianist's elegant playing had helped him rise to prominence in Chicago, where he led the house trio at The London House from the late 1950s to the late '60s. He was subsequently hired for recording sessions by guest stars who sat in, like Wayne Shorter, Coleman Hawkins and Lee Morgan. Later,



Higgins and his wife, jazz singer Meredith d'Ambrosio, split time between Cape Cod and South Florida. Concert dates in Japan (where he is revered) and Korea were on the pianist's calendar at the time of his death. Note: A jam session tribute to Higgins will take place 4-6PM Sunday, Dec. 6 at the Ft. Lauderdale branch library's ArtServe auditorium on Sunrise Blvd. **BM**



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CHEF JOHN'S

AMERICAN BISTRO & BLUES BAR

WEDNESDAYS AT 9pm: Blues/Blues-Rock Open Mic Night hosted by Charlie Eginton

THURSDAYS AT 7pm: R&B by Harold Seay (KC & Sunshine Band)

FRIDAYS AT 9:30pm: Blues Company

SATURDAYS AT 9:30pm: Snakeboy Johnson

DECEMBER 10: R&B by Harold Seay hosts a special
JazzBluesFlorida promotion night

Win two tickets (\$70!) to Taras Foundation's Roy Rogers show!

More information at jazz-bluesflorida.blogspot.com

DECEMBER 13: 11am-2pm Jazz Brunch w/ The Susan Merritt Trio
w/featured vocalist. RSVP required.

DECEMBER 21: 7pm: JP Soars & The Red Hots **Dinner Show**
Doors 6:30pm, show 8:30pm. Three-course dinner & show \$35. RSVP required.

NEW YEAR'S EVE: Ring in the new year with a fabulous dinner!



Excellent menu and full bar with a great line-of-sight everywhere! Dinner from 5pm. Closed Monday.

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Jazz up the Holidays!

A Night Before Christmas

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Join Grammy nominated jazz greats **Spyro Gyra** and **Jane Monheit** for a magical evening of smooth jazz music and holiday favorites mixed with warm, sultry vocals and a funky contemporary vibe.



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