

Up front



John Rossi (center), drummer for Roomful of Blues, thinks the genre's recent surge of popularity is only "a short-lived fad."



The popularity of blues band 5 Guys Named Moe is local evidence of the national trend toward roots rock

The return to music roots: musicians sing the blues while pop gets jazzed up

By RHYS WILLIAMS
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Considering that blues and jazz are the only musical forms truly indigenous to the United States, it is ironic how often it is left to the British to recognize an artist's talents.

In the late 1960's it was the "British Invasion" of the Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin, Eric Clapton and Jeff Beck that first introduced blues to a massive white audience, and in recent years, both Stevie Ray Vaughan and Robert Cray have achieved commercial success across the puddle before they received any recognition at home.

In addition, since leaving the Police, Sting has returned to his jazz roots with albums such as *The Dream Of The Blue Turtles* and *Nothing Like The Sun*. The resulting critical acclaim is presumably justifying the small fortune it must require simply to keep Branford Marsalis in his band.

Sting is only one of many artists at the forefront of a recent resurgence of interest in "roots music," such as blues, jazz, soul, and zydeco, an accordion-based dance music from Louisiana.

The former Policeman hired renowned jazz musicians such as Marsalis and Gil Evans. David Bowie has had bluesmen such as Albert Collins and Stevie Ray Vaughan play on his recent records. Paul Simon, with Ladysmith Black Mambazo, featured zydeco heavily on his *Graceland* LP, and the Fabulous Thunderbirds, Los Lobos and Robert Cray have all achieved chart success with their jazz-flavored recordings. Popular movies such as "La Bamba," "The Big Chill" and "The Big Easy" have soundtracks featuring zydeco, rockabilly and soul.

This nationwide trend has not gone unnoticed in the Triangle area, especially in Chapel Hill, where clubs, musicians and record stores are reflecting jazz's newfound popularity.

Rock music as a genre has always had its innovators as well as its plagiarists ready to exploit the latest style. But the marriage of mainstream music to jazz and blues is an unlikely one. Producing a hit single is a very structured process.

In contrast, jazz and blues rely very much upon improvisation and the interplay between members of the band. The individual freedom of expression allows for greater dynamics in the music, but also limits the artists to a more select audience. But for the moment, blues and jazz are in the mainstream.

In the record market, Sting might be selling more records, but Robert Cray appears to be having a wider influence in Chapel Hill. "Although Sting's records are selling well, jazz represents more of a constant," says Sherman Tate of the Record Bar on Franklin Street. "Kenny G sells well, and the Marsalis brothers, but sales haven't changed dramatically in recent months.

"Blues, on the other hand, is doing great business, a lot of which is due to Robert Cray," Tate says.

Across the street at Schoolkids Records, the story

is much the same. "The major labels don't want to sink money into jazz," says Schoolkids employee Freddie Jenkins. "It's far easier and cheaper to re-issue albums from the back catalogue, with some digital re-mastering. This might sound cynical, but the results are not all bad. CBS has re-mastered some classic stuff by Miles Davis and Thelonus Monk, and RCA has dug up and re-mastered a bunch of really old Fats Waller and Duke Ellington. Some of it sounds quite unbelievable."

Jenkins agrees with Tate, however, that blues is gaining in popularity faster than jazz.

"Blues is more popular because it's where rock 'n' roll comes from," he says. "It's a natural progression — or regression, I guess — for people to turn to the originals after hearing a modern band play the stuff. It'll probably stay that way, too, although I don't think that jazz or blues will remain in the mainstream for long."

Paul Simon's staggeringly successful, Grammy-winning *Graceland* album opened many ears to zydeco for the first time, and this has also had an important influence on the genre in general. "Alton Rubin, the accordion player with Good Rockin' Dopsie, plays on a lot of *Graceland*," says Peter Cashwell of the Record Bar, "and its success has turned many people onto the music of Clifton Chenier and Buckwheat Zydeco. The soundtrack LP to 'The Big Easy' also has a lot of this type of music."

The band members themselves say they have also noticed this renewal of public interest in the blues. "It's important to take the chances that come," believes John Rossi, the drummer with Rhode Island-based Roomful Of Blues. "At the moment, we're trying to get out of a tour of Japan which clashes with the Grammy Awards. Our LP, *Glazed* is in the same category as Robert Cray, and we feel it's important to be where the contacts are."

But, while he is optimistic about negotiating a better contract, Rossi remains cynical about blues and jazz making a lasting impression on the market. "I think it's a short-lived fad," he admits. "I mean, we were at a festival this summer with Rockin' Dopsie, and Paul Simon had just sent him a check for \$50,000 for his work on *Graceland*. It'll help him for a year, but then he'll go back to where he was before. That's why it's important for us to take advantage of this while we can."

Perhaps Rossi's cynicism is a result of almost 20 years on the road with Roomful Of Blues. But Danny Morris, the singer-guitarist with local band Blue-Note Special, says he feels that 1988 might be his year to break into the music business. "It's been growing steadily for a couple of years now, and Robert Cray's success is going to help us a lot," he says. "It's just a question of keeping going forward, and hoping for the best."

In the Chapel Hill clubs, more people are coming out for an evening of blues or jazz. David Allen, owner of Magdalena's La Terraza, 508 W. Franklin Street,

has noticed the resurgence of interest in the blues, and has brought several bands to Chapel Hill, as well as providing a popular venue for local bands such as Blue-Note Special and 5 Guys Named Moe.

"There appears to be quite a market for blues at the moment," Allen says. "When I brought The Professor's Blues Review here in October, we lost a lot of money, because it was a mid-week gig and the club had only been open for a short time. Now that we're established, we can regularly fill out for a normal weekday gig. Fridays and Saturdays are always packed."

But does jazz appear to have the same attraction as blues? "No, we don't hire too many jazz bands," he says. "It's because jazz is a very easy music to mutilate, but it's very difficult to play well. There just aren't as many good jazz bands around at the moment as there are good blues bands."

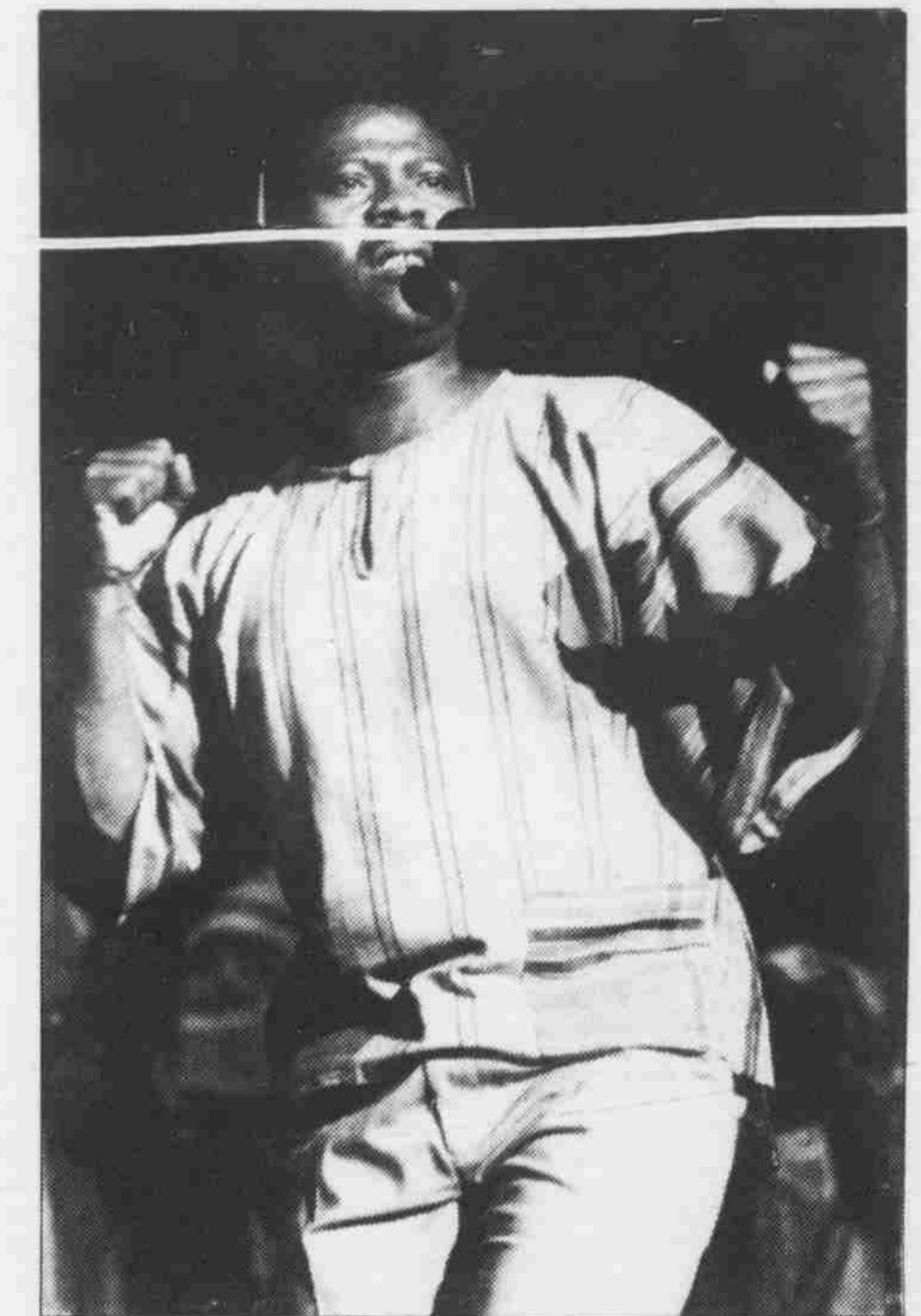
Some clubs, however, are finding that there is a market for jazz in Chapel Hill. The ArtsCenter in Carrboro has a regular "Sunday Jazz Series" which is approaching its third birthday. In the last couple of weeks alone, the series has featured the Fred Lite Quartet from New York, and T. Lavitz and the Bad Habitz, which features another rock star (Lavitz used to play with Dixie Dregs) who has returned to his jazz roots.

Jane Reinecke, who is in charge of the series, has noticed the recent increase in public interest — and attributes at least part of it to "the rock element" — but she also says, "We are noticing more people, but this is partly because we have a new building. Also, local radio stations and newspapers have done a marvelous job in giving us publicity. On average, we get 75 to a hundred people coming to see a local group, and we can get between 200 or 300 for a big group."

Armand Lenchek, guitarist and singer with local blues combo 5 Guys Named Moe, also teaches guitar at Oxbow Music, and he has noticed an increase in local guitarists who want to play blues. Armand has also noticed that most of the people wanting to play blues tend to be in college and older. Younger students still tend to want to play classic rock, he says.

So, it seems public interest in Chapel Hill appears to favor blues over jazz at the moment. Although jazz took birth in the cities — contrary to the rural beginnings of blues and gospel — blues has moved successfully to both electric instruments, and the urban environment. In doing so, it provided many of the foundations for rock 'n' roll.

Much of the present popularity of blues and jazz is probably due to a passing trend that will soon give way to another. It's possible that in two years' time, Los Lobos will be regarded in a similar vein to Katrina and the Waves in the one-hit-wonder stakes. But, for now, there is the distinct possibility of commercial success for musicians who truly deserve the term "artists."



Joseph Shabalala and Ladysmith Black Mambazo brought their form of South African zydeco music to Memorial Hall in November. The group's sound was introduced to America through Paul Simon's "Graceland" album.



Sting leads the wave of pop artists who've returned to their jazz roots