



THIS STORY HAS BEEN FORMATTED FOR EASY PRINTING

Feelin' the blues

The Boston Globe

An elder statesman of Boston's music scene finds himself homeless, but not friendless

By Brian Messenger, Globe Correspondent | July 9, 2005

As a steamy July day faded into evening, Weepin' Willie Robinson sat on a downtown bench under the shelter of a tree strung with unlit decorative lights. With the Old State House and surrounding skyscrapers towering above his perch, he enjoyed a cigarette, the city bustling around him.

The man known as Boston's Elder Statesman of the Blues looked right at home sitting at the intersection of Washington and Court streets, little more than a stone's throw away from his old stomping grounds. Gone is Boston's notorious Combat Zone, as well as the long-forgotten bars and clubs that were home to some of the city's most memorable musical talent. But Robinson, who celebrated his 79th birthday Wednesday, is still here, still playing the blues, and, even in his old age, continuing to pay his dues.

"When I sing the funky blues, I feel good inside," Robinson said inside the New England Shelter for Homeless Veterans on Court Street, where he's been staying since mid-March. "This is not music for the young guys."

Robinson's predicament seems to read right out of a blues lyric: After being forced to leave the home of a lady friend with whom he'd been staying for more than two years, the singer had nowhere else to go.

"She told me to get out. I did. I came here the same day," Robinson said. "As we speak, I'm trying to find a place."

A homeless shelter hardly seems an appropriate place for a man of Robinson's stature -- a veteran who served three years in the Army and an undisputed fixture on Boston's blues scene.

"A fixture? He's more like the foundation. He's been here a long time. He's been doing it and doing it and doing it," said Big Jack Ward, Robinson's guitarist in the late '80s and early '90s, and currently a member of the Luther "Guitar Jr." Johnson Band. "Not a lot of people last as long as Weep, especially in this business," Ward said before going onstage with Robinson Wednesday night for a jam session at the Cantab Lounge in Cambridge. "If I can be playing the blues when I'm Weep's age, I'll be the happiest guy in town."

Local musicians and the newly formed New England Blues Hall of Fame are trying to get the vocalist out of the homeless shelter and back living on his own. They are hosting a "Blues Celebrity Roast & Hall of Fame Induction" tomorrow afternoon at Club 58 in Quincy Center, where Robinson will be honored as the Hall of Fame's first living inductee. Proceeds from the show -- which will feature performances by Little Joe Cook and the Thrillers and former Muddy Waters guitarist and Brookline native Steady Rollin' Bob Margolin, among other acts -- will go toward a housing fund for Robinson.

"Unfortunately, Weepin' Willie is in dire need of help from friends and musicians alike," said Paul Papetti, one of the blues hall of fame's founders. "We're trying to raise some money to try and find him a permanent home."

Margolin, who this year won the W.C. Handy Award for best blues guitarist, said he could relate to Robinson's recent struggles, explaining that blues musicians everywhere are struggling to get by in an ultra-competitive and ever-evolving entertainment market. "It's a hard road commercially. The music is [still] very much alive and exciting, though," Margolin said. "This blues music brings soulful people together. We've got to help ourselves out because no one else will."

A wide-open town

Robinson was born in Atlanta in 1926, and spent his youth picking cotton, tomatoes, and other crops with his parents across the East Coast. His mother and father died when Robinson was a boy, and he wound up living

in New Jersey. He joined the Army, and after leaving the service he settled in Trenton, a common stop in the 1950s for blues acts such as B.B. King and Bobby "Blue" Bland. Soon Robinson was working as an MC at Trenton blues clubs, as well as staying late to clean up after the shows.

"It ain't easy, but if you want to be in the limelight and be seen all the time, then that's one way to do it," Robinson said.

At B.B. King's suggestion, Robinson began singing in addition to MCing. He got his feet wet with the support of King's band. "B.B. sang the blues from his heart," Robinson said. "He'd make a rat get up and start crying."

Living in Trenton gave him the opportunity to meet some of the biggest players in the blues and make connections in both the Newark and Philadelphia scenes, but Robinson said it took him only a few visits to Boston with his band before he decided he'd stay. He moved here in 1959 and has never left.

"I came up three times. The third time I stayed here," Robinson said. "When I came here, this joint was wide open. Believe me. When it got dark, we was ready to do it."

Robinson made his living playing his music for what would turn out to be several generations of blues fans. As his career went on, however, one thing remained constant: Weepin' Willie, a 30-plus-year veteran of Boston blues, had yet to release an album.

"I wasn't thinking about recording back in the day," said Robinson. "I had four women. I said, 'What do I need to record [for]?' "

It wasn't until Robinson met fellow blues singer Mighty Sam McClain, a native of Monroe, La., whose soulful vocals brought him success during the 1960s, that his talents were finally captured in the studio. After McClain moved to the Boston area in 1993 and met Robinson for the first time at the old House of Blues, the two became friends and eventually made arrangements in the late '90s to head to Kansas and record the then-72-year-old Robinson.

The resulting album -- "At Last, On Time," which features McClain and local blues star Susan Tedeschi on vocals and guitar -- was released in 1999 on APO Records. The album showcases the smooth and distinctive vocals that have helped Robinson win over crowds for years. "Willie has one of those voices where if you hear it once, you won't forget it," McClain said.

Despite McClain's resurgent success over the past decade and a half, the singer said he can relate to where Robinson comes from, and the road he's been down more recently.

"Through all he's been through, he still loves getting on that stage," McClain said. "His music makes him rich."

A happy birthday

Veterans shuffle through the first floor of the homeless shelter, repeatedly going out of their way to greet Robinson; the bluesman, sharply dressed in a gray suit coat, white button-down shirt, and black fedora, walks with a limp as well as a swagger and gets around reasonably well with or without his cane. He has a welcoming, gap-toothed smile for everyone who calls out his name.

"He's entertaining, to say the least," said Tom Miller, a Navy veteran who is the shelter's shift supervisor. "And I'm not talking [just] musically, I'm talking as a man."

Miller estimates that at least half of the people who wind up at the shelter have become homeless for reasons unrelated to substance abuse -- health problems, lost jobs, or divorce, to name a few. "There's quite a diverse population. Not everybody's a drug addict or an alcoholic," Miller said. "A lot of guys are living payday to payday."

Robinson admits to the exploits of his earlier years, but he's also proud to share that he's cleaned up his act. "I used to do drugs. I used to drink a lot," he said. "But I don't do any of that now."

He looked a bit worn but content as he waited at the shelter for a ride to the Cantab Lounge for a jam session the evening of his birthday. "I always look forward to another birthday," Robinson said. "I'll be happy if I get through another year."

Ronnie Gay, a friend and fellow veteran who said he's kept an eye on Robinson since he walked through the shelter's doors more than three months ago, was with the singer as he and the other veterans gave him a birthday cake earlier that day. "It counts an awful lot to see him happy," said Gay, 58. "You get him out on the streets here and people are always, 'Hey, Weepin' Willie!' He's well known here in Boston. More than even he knows."

At the Cantab, the dance floor filled once Robinson perched on a bar stool in front of the band. A few songs into the set, he stood and worked the dance floor, eventually serenading a woman in red. Once he finished his set, he returned, unassumingly, to his place at a table off to the side of the dim lounge.

Sipping a beer bought for him by the woman in red, Robinson was feeling good. "I do all right," he said. "These knees, I'm catching hell with them. And at my age, that's kind of hard." Still, Boston's Elder Statesman of the Blues had no complaints. "When I'm singing, the pain goes away."

The New England Blues Hall of Fame "Blues Celebrity Roast & Hall of Fame Induction" is at Club 58, 58 Ross Way, Quincy, tomorrow. Music begins at 2 p.m.; roast and Hall of Fame induction 6-7 p.m.; celebrity jam, 7-11 p.m. Tickets \$20. Call 617-471-7788. ■

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