

SENIOR LIFE

Blues legend Weepin' Willie Robinson calls JP home

BY ABIGAIL NORMAN
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Sitting on the sun porch at Mount Pleasant Home several months ago, Weepin' Willie Robinson, who turned 80 on July 6, grinned and said, "My pains are getting next to me. But the minute I get up on stage and start to sing, I feel good."

He makes his audience feel good, too. A sharp dresser and sweet talker, Robinson knows how to work a crowd, flirting with women, mixing jokes and patter with his tunes. He's the first to call himself an entertainer. And he's proud of winning last year's Lifetime Achievement Hall of Fame Award from the Boston Music Awards.

Robinson's story is part of the great black migration from South to North. A migrant farm worker as a child, he hardly went to school, lost his mother young and followed his father to New Jersey when he was in his teens. There he drove a milk truck, washed dishes and eventually ended up working in a bar.

"One night they didn't have nobody to bring people onto the stage," he recalled. "It went from that to trying to sing. I sang walking to the store—everywhere I went. I practiced, and I got pretty good."

One night, when Robinson was working as master of ceremonies, B.B. King invited him on stage, backed up by his 21-piece band. Gradually Robinson gathered a band of his own. In 1959, the manager of Louie's, an old Roxbury club, heard him sing and invited him to Boston. He has been here ever since.

With his current band, Weepin' Willie & the All-Star Blues Band, he still sings nearly every week in clubs throughout the state.

"I love the blues, but I didn't love the old blues," Robinson said. "Anything from the '50s was all right to me." One of his most popular renditions is of Frank Sinatra's "Pennies from Heaven." But the song that



Gazette Photo by John Swan

Blues singer and winner of a 2005 Boston Music Hall of Fame Award Weepin' Willie Robinson reminisces about his storied career during an interview at Mount Pleasant Home.

came to his mind on the Mount Pleasant sun porch began. "If you've ever known misfortune, then you know what I'm talking about." The tremor on the last phrase and Robinson's lingering smile delivered the combination of suffering and solace that is at the heart of the classic blues.

Bassist Tim Ingles, who plays on Robinson's recent CD, "At Last, On Time" (APO Records), sees Robinson's music in perspective. "There aren't a lot of Willies left. That generation is being lost," he reflected. "Blues is about a life experience. It came out of suffering, hard times, and it told the story of those times."

Hard times have not left Robinson far behind. Last year found him living at the veterans' shelter downtown for nearly four months. A lady friend had asked him to leave her home, and he had nearly wound up on the street. But the tight-knit blues community pulled together to take care of its own.

Band members, radio host Jim Carty and musicians, including James Montgomery and Big Jack Hardy, got together to hold a benefit concert and find him a place to live. Merlin Southwick, director of Mount Pleasant Home, saw a news story about the benefit and called the shelter the next day.

"The story struck me because so many people have given so much throughout their lives and

are left with nothing," Southwick recalled. "The shelter put me in touch with this group of musicians, I told them about Mt. Pleasant, and they brought him over to take a look."

Robinson is comfortable in the S. Huntington Avenue home, where he can come and go as he likes. "It'll be nice if people in the neighborhood get to know him and come to visit him there," band member Gary Barcus said.

Local band leader Dave Hannon recently took his young son, Caleb, to visit Robinson, introducing him to this local legend who is now part of JP. This winter, Robinson stood up from the audience to sing with Hannon's band at the Milky Way. After a few songs, he "owned the room," Hannon said. He invited Robinson to star at his All-Ages Blues Review that packed the Milky Way in April.

Tim Ingles added that many younger musicians playing blues these days come to it from other traditions, and many are white. "Now young African-American musicians are telling their stories through hip-hop, rap and other kinds of music," Ingles said. "But blues lives on in jazz, hip hop, everything. Painters study the masters. If you're going to study music, you need to know about the blues."

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