

By Larry O'Connor
staff writer

The harmonica player wails in the smoky bar, stopping only long enough to tell his story. "Everything is all right, Harmonica Shah," she said. "You're nubbier but a Doc trout playboy." Yes, this is the blues... the real blues, where real people sing about their real feelings. "It takes heart to play the blues," said Harmonica Shah, 41, holding court after the men's room of the venue. "It takes pure, damn heart." Harmonica Shah, who's a cab driver by day, certainly has heart. As does Robert Noll of Livonia, renowned guitarist with the Blues Mission. But few people have appreciated the heart of the bluesman, nor his music for that matter. Blues artists in Detroit have lived in virtual anonymity over the years. Yet the artists who have played here read like the who's who of the blues. Johnny "Yard Dog" Jones, Eddie "Guitar" Burns, Bobo Jenkins, Billy Davis, Willie D. Warren, Howlin' Wolf, John Lee Hooker, "Uncle" Jessie White and Little Sonny are just few. To many, Chicago is the home of the blues. But as The Butler Twins proclaim in their song on the "Blues Factory, Vol. 1," album, "Don't Look Now Chicago (Detroit is On Your Back)."

YES, THE blues have returned (not that they ever really left). And the man with the victory torch is the Famous Coachman. Who is the Famous Coachman? one dare ask.

To the Detroit blues fan, that's like asking someone in Poland who is Karol Wojtyla. When Famous Coachman walks into the kitchen of Moby Dick's in Dearborn, he's received like the pope.

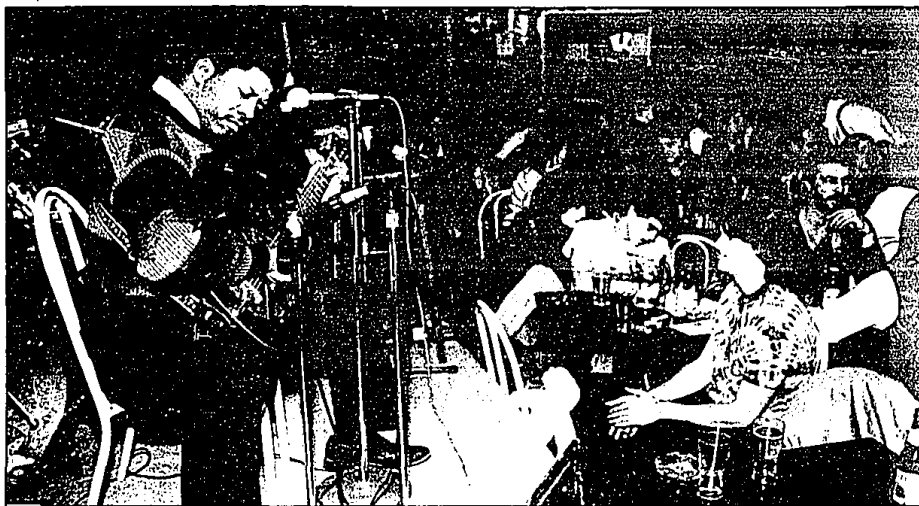
Famous Coachman ("That's my real name. That's how I sign my checks") hosts a weekly radio show from midnight to 6 a.m. Sundays on WDET-FM. He played the blues on radio when nobody else did.

"The blues are back," proclaimed Famous Coachman, between bites of a ham and cheese sandwich. "They're back in Detroit and neighboring cities." On this night, Moby Dick's is packed for a jubilee, presented by Detroit Blues Factory Records. Harmonica Shah, Robert Noll & The Blues Mission, Eddie Burns, The Butler Twins and Willie D. Warren are only a few who are on the bill.

The label was started by a couple of Detroit area businessmen, Steve Sanchez and Mark Foreman, along with Robert Noll who were trying to promote the city's blues heritage. The label's first album, "Detroit Blues Factory, Vol. 1," is already in its second pressing.

The music, whose Detroit roots were in the city's "Black Bottom" area of Hastings and 12th Street, has had a resurgence in the suburbs.

"That's what's really weird about it," said Erik Smith, news reporter for Channel 7 and an avid blues supporter. "It's a black dominated field and its appeal stretches to racially mixed places in the suburbs... it has spread its wings."



photos by BILL BRESLER/staff photographer

The acoustic blues are Robert Jones specialty as he plays for an appreciative crowd at the Blues Factory Jubilee at Moby Dick's in Dearborn.

THE BLUES can be enjoyed by anyone, no matter what race, income or residence. A testament to that is Robert Noll, who is white, from Livonia and an accomplished blues guitarist.

Noll has toured around the world with Grammy-winning blues artist, Albert Collins. He's also worked with Little Ruben and Big Twist & The Mellow Fellows.

Noll's love of the blues started at 16 when his parents bought him a B.B. King album.

"My blues collection got started from there," said Noll, 32. "I would go and buy a couple of rock albums, but I always bought a blues album as well."

Noll, who's been playing the guitar since he was 6, began incorporating a few blues numbers in his repertoire at teenage dances.

"Everybody has this idea that the blues are about hanging your head and crying," Noll said. "Blues tell the story, happy and sad."

The story of the blues artist has been mostly a sad one. For years, even today, many have never received the recognition so richly deserved.

Some were exploited by record companies. Others

fell on times too hard to sing about.

One slight black man, sharply attired in a brown suit, is sitting down at Moby Dick's with a weary smile on his face. He is a survivor.

Willie D. Warren, 63, is a legend in Detroit blues circles, having played with Bobo Jenkins, Muddy Waters and Freddie King among a few others. He started playing the blues in 1939.

BLUES FACTORY Records plans to release an album of Warren's work in the near future. After more than 40 years of playing the blues, the yet-to-be recorded album will be Warren's first.

"It's going to take a little time," said Warren, in a soft, yet weathered voice. "I can't jump up and do it like I used when I was young."

"I'm proud of what's happening now. I feel I need something to happen for myself."

Reasons for the blues revival of late are many.

For one, musicians and music listeners are going back to their roots. And the roots of rock 'n' roll and country came from the blues.

Also, rockers like Robert Cray have brought a new awareness to the blues. That doesn't have Famous Coachman too happy.

"My whole beef is rock 'n' roll bands play two or three licks of the blues and the rest is rock 'n' roll," Famous Coachman said. "And they call it the blues."

While Famous Coachman finds it detracts from the purity of the blues, Noll thinks it helps.

"If it keeps the blues alive, I think it's good," Noll said. "There's so many different types of blues... People will always go back to the source."

The Robert Noll Blues Mission, Johnny "Yard Dog" Jones, Eddie Burns, The Alligators, Little Junior Cannaday and Big Rodgers will all perform at the Blues Factory St. Patrick's Jubilee on Saturday, March 19, at Moby Dick's, 5452 Schaefer, between Ford Road and Michigan Avenue, Dearborn. The show starts at 8 p.m.; doors open at 6 p.m. Tickets are available at Moby Dick's and TicketMaster Outlets. For more information, call 581-3650.



Robert Noll, who grew up in Livonia, does one of his patented guitar riffs with the Robert Noll Blues Mission.

The Detroit BLUES

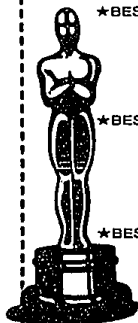


With the large crowd enjoying the Blues Factory Jubilee at Moby Dick's in Dearborn, there's little room for movement. But it doesn't prevent Marion Sicilia of Dearborn Heights and Joë Palazzolo of Westland from dancing to the music.



Buddy Folks and his One Man Band gets the crowd going with his harmonica-accented blues music.

★ ★ OSCAR CONTEST ★ ★



★ BEST PICTURE

- ☐ Broadcast News
- ☐ Fatal Attraction
- ☐ Hope and Glory
- ☐ The Last Emperor
- ☐ Moonstruck

★ BEST ACTRESS

- ☐ Cher, Moonstruck
- ☐ Glenn Close, Fatal Attraction
- ☐ Sally Kirkland, Anna
- ☐ Meryl Streep, Ironweed
- ☐ Holly Hunter, Broadcast News

★ BEST ACTOR

- ☐ Michael Douglas, Wall Street
- ☐ William Hurt, Broadcast News
- ☐ Marcello Mastroianni, Dark Eyes
- ☐ Jack Nicholson, Ironweed
- ☐ Robin Williams, Good Morning, Vietnam

★ BEST SUPPORTING ACTOR

- ☐ Albert Brooks, Broadcast News
- ☐ Sean Connery, The Untouchables
- ☐ Morgan Freeman, Street Smart
- ☐ Vincent Gardenia, Moonstruck
- ☐ Denzel Washington, Cry Freedom

★ BEST SUPPORTING ACTRESS

- ☐ Norma Aleandro, Gaby, A True Story
- ☐ Ann Archer, Fatal Attraction
- ☐ Olympia Dukakis, Moonstruck
- ☐ Ann Ramsey, Throw Momma From the Train
- ☐ Ann Southern, The Whales of August

★ BEST DIRECTOR

- ☐ Adrian Lyne, Fatal Attraction
- ☐ John Boorman, Hope and Glory
- ☐ Bernardo Bertolucci, The Last Emperor
- ☐ Lasse Hallstrom, My Life as a Dog
- ☐ Norman Jewison, Moonstruck

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You must be 18 years old to enter

What's your Oscar picks?

The Hollywood hoopla is about to begin.

Monday, April 11, all eyes will be on the movie mecca as actors, actresses and anyone who has something to do with making movies puts on their best duds for the 60th annual Academy Awards.

Everyone has their favorites from the stars to the people who plunk down their hard earned money to see Hollywood's cinematic creations and half the fun of Oscar night is seeing if those favorites are in the winner's circle.

Well, the Observer and Eccentric Newspapers, AMC Theaters and United Airlines have teamed up to offer readers a chance to pit their prognostic skills against the results of voting by members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in the second annual Academy Awards contest.

The rules are simple, but the payoff is big for the person who picks the most winners in six categories — best picture, best actress, best actor, best supporting actress, best supporting actor and best director.

The grand prize winner and a guest will receive a trip to Hollywood with round trip air from United. The second-place winner will receive an AMC gold pass and the

third-place prize will be AMC guest passes.

Here's the contest rules:

(1) Contestants should fill out the Oscar contest entry form, available at AMC theaters and in the Observer and Eccentric Newspapers.

(2) Forms must be turned in by midnight Friday, April 8. They can be dropped off at any AMC theater and the Observer and Eccentric offices in Livonia, Farmington, Birmingham, Plymouth and Rochester, or mailed to AMC Theaters, Suite 123, 6689 Orchard Lake Road, West Bloomfield 48322.

(3) No purchase is necessary, but the limit is one entry per person.

(4) If more than one entry contains the most correct answers, the winner of the grand prize and subsequent prizes will be selected by random drawing.

(5) Employees of the Observer and Eccentric Newspapers, AMC Theaters and United Airlines and their immediate families are not eligible to enter the contest.

(6) Winners will be announced in the Monday, April 18, Street Scene section of the Observer & Eccentric newspapers.

(7) The judges' decisions are final.

OK, so what are you waiting for... Oh... On your mark, get set



"Fatal Attraction," starring Michael Douglas and Glenn Close, is in the running for an Oscar for best picture.