

Slim DeNunn and the High Rollers play the Blues

BY TONY RUSSO
STAFF WRITER

BERLIN — Todd Smith spent the better part of his adult life sharing the stage and working in the studio with some of the most influential acts of the late 20th Century, but it took his arrival in Salisbury for him to make the transformation to Slim DeNunn, the name he takes as frontman of the High Rollers.

Smith moved to the Eastern Shore in 2004 and set about trying to access the music scene, such as it was. He played with several local bands, including Muskrat Sally, but eventually reached a place in his life where he decided he'd rather just play what he wanted when he wanted.

He switched from the electric to the standup bass and went through the hand-bleeding process of learning to be subtle on an instrument that requires a certain amount of force to generate sound.

"My hands bled a lot for the first six-weeks," he said. "But eventually you learn the subtleties and how to be more efficient."

Putting together a blues band from scratch is apparently easier than you might think. Putting together the right lineup, however, took a little more time.



But for the last three years, Smith has collaborated with Dr. Jay, Lips and Rooster who make up the High Rollers.

Dr. Jay is Jay Carlander guitarist and the first recruited member of the High Rollers. Formerly of the alt-country band Borrowed Time, which opened for Willie Nelson and other major touring country artists, Carlander played guitar with alternative/surf/punk icon Brad Nack.

Smith called harmonica player Brian Veditz, a.k.a. Lips, one of the best harmonica players he's ever seen. Like the others, Veditz is a student of the genre, taking his place as a blues harp player acolyte-serious, staying true to the process as well as the production.

Drummer Chuck Demartin — High

Roller handle: Rooster — is a working musician whose expertise is sought on both sides of the Chesapeake Bay. But when you're part of a group of high quality musicians playing what's among the purest music, getting up to speed has more to do with finding the groove than beating it to death.

To say that they don't play hard-driving blues wouldn't be accurate, but neither is it defining. They are, to a man, students of the art, each with one foot firmly planted in the 21st Century and one in the early 20th Century.

Although recordings are still relatively easy to come by, Slim DeNunn and the High Rollers like to use YouTube to find songs. Finding rare video of blues bands playing live gives them that

much more information to bring to their interpretation of the genre.

Any concert-goer will tell you that all the best versions of the best songs are live. And it's not just the atmosphere, it's the musician reacting to the atmosphere as well as to whatever other factors played into the moment they stepped on stage that particular night. Add 60 years and the historical understanding of blues students and what Slim DeNunn and the High Rollers do with already little-known nuggets is astounding.

Like many of the local blues acts, they don't find a ton of bar work, especially in Salisbury, but they do well on the festival circuit, having played at the Salisbury Festival among other places,

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Medicine drop big success

BERLIN — The one-day “medicine drop” sponsored by the Assateague Coastal Trust Assateague Coastkeeper, Berlin Police Department, Worcester County Sheriff’s Office and Worcester County Health Department took in 130 pounds of unwanted medications last Saturday.

That is a significant amount of medications that will not be subject to possible misuse and will not be flushed into local waterways.

“By providing a safe and secure way for people to get rid of unwanted medications, Operation Medicine Drop, part of the national drug-take back program sponsored by the Drug Enforcement Administration, helps prevent accidental poisonings, drug abuse and helps protect our waters,” said Assateague Coastkeeper Kathy Phillips.

Phillips said that community turnout at the five county drop-off locations was substantial with county and municipal enforcement officers collecting the unwanted medications during the four-hour effort.

Volunteers from Assateague Coastal Trust and the Worcester County Health Department assisted in recycling the plastic pill containers and answering questions about the campaign.

The Ocean Pines Food Lion drop off location was the busiest with a total of 75 pounds of pills and medications collected. The Berlin Police Department collected 21.5 pounds, while the West Ocean City Food Lion location collected 21 pounds. Snow Hill and Pocomoke netted a total of 12.5 pounds.

The collected medications were turned over by the local enforcement agency partners to DEA Special Agent David Rivello, who took everything to an approved hazardous material incineration facility for safe disposal.

“Abuse of prescription medications and accidental ingestion is a growing danger within our communities,” Rivello said. “However if I know that at least one child was saved from harm as a result of today’s efforts I will be extremely happy.”

Blues

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but when they do play out, they make an impression.

Smith said that whenever they finish they’re often visited by a handful of Blues aficionados eager to get their hands on a Slim DeNunn and the High Rollers CD.

“They say, ‘Nobody plays this stuff anymore,’” Smith said.

One of the reasons they haven’t had a CD before is getting the rights to many of the songs they like the best is a little expensive. Writing their own, however, is a different story altogether.

At some point, the student demonstrates respect for the master by trying not to duplicate what they’ve learned but rather to build upon it. As Slim DeNunn and the High Rollers prepare to head into the studio with their own songs, that’s precisely what they hope to do.

Smith said they’ve already written a handful of songs to record — one of which, titled “Ocean City” is available on their website — and look forward to test driving them when they open the Berlin Jazz and Blues Bash Saturday.

This is what the festival is about, bringing together people who love the blues and bands who love to play them.

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