

Blues piano player is the real deal

Victoria's David Vest has gigged with Tammy Wynette, Bill Black

[Adrian Chamberlain](#) / The Victoria Times Colonist

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PREVIEW

David Vest with East Meets Vest

Where: Hermann's Jazz Club

When: Oct. 31, 8 p.m.

Tickets: \$25 door/\$20 advance, at [eventbrite.ca](#) or Ditch Records, Lyle's Place

Piano man David Vest may be Victoria's best-kept secret.

Since moving to this city in 2004, the Alabama native has kept a fairly low profile. Yet his résumé reveals a bona fide boogie-woogie bluesman who's performed with some of the best. The 68-year-old singer/pianist first started tearing it up at clubs in the American South in the late 1950s.

Vest, who plays Hermann's Jazz Club on Halloween night, has gigged with Tammy Wynette, Big Joe Turner and Bill Black. He's toured with Floyd Dixon and Lavelle White.

In recent years, he co-fronted the acclaimed Paul deLay Band.

Boogie-woogie pianist Katie Webster, after hearing Vest pound the keys at a Houston nightclub, once declared: "I know it when I hear it!"

Last year, Vest was nominated for a Maple Blues Award for best piano player. Yet the Victoria media didn't pick up on it, not realizing Vest is a local musician.

He's poised to play Hermann's with his East Meets Vest band, with guitarist Teddy Leonard, bassist Gary Kendall and drummer Mike Fitzpatrick (the latter two from the Downchild Blues Band). All three can be heard on Vest's new album, *East Meets Vest*, which also features contributions from guitarist Paul James.

Vest recently chatted in the James Bay heritage home he shares with a grand piano and his wife, a Canadian who met him while he was playing a Salem, Oregon, nightclub.

"I saw her when she came in the door. I came over and got introduced to her. It went on from there," he said with a smile.

The *East Meets Vest* recording reflects his rich musical background. It includes a swinging rendition of St. Louis Blues, the W.C. Handy classic Vest recalls playing at his first professional gig. That was in 1957, most likely in Huntsville, Alabama, he said. He was in his early teens.

"I was playing rock and roll," said Vest, one of those gracious Southerners who's full of stories.

He's got a lot of them. There is, for instance, the time he recorded Wynette - in fact, Vest believes he was the first person to get her in the studio.

This was the early 1960s, before she achieved fame with songs such as Stand by Your Man (1968). The two knew each other, having played on morning TV shows together. Wynette wanted to make a demo to pitch to Nashville producers. And Vest knew a guy who had the keys to a studio and a spare reel of tape.

"She said, 'We don't have any songs to record. They want original songs.' She was kind of cute, so I said, 'I'll write you some songs.' "

Wynette was turned down in Nashville, but was eventually signed by producer Billy Sherrill to Epic Records in 1966.

"She was great. She was a good friend," said Vest, who hasn't seen her since then. "She was the kind of gal you went out and had a milkshake with."

Vest grew up wanting to play the piano the way bluesman John Lee Hooker played the guitar.

The first big name he played with was the Bill Black Combo (Black was the bassist in Elvis Presley's band). Vest was just out of high school, playing a club in Pensacola, Florida, with his band, the Esquires.

At the club, he sat in with Black's outfit. Black's saxophonist, John "Ace" Cannon, offered to give the 18-year-old a life lesson.

"He said, 'Boy, you need some drinkin' lessons. Follow me.' He ordered a bottle of Old Charter and got me drunk."

When he was 20, Vest scored some dates with Big Joe Turner, the Kansas City blues shouter known for Shake, Rattle and Roll.

Turner was booked at a Birmingham, Alabama, club called The Pussycat-a-Go-go. The word was that he was short a piano player.

Vest volunteered, being familiar with Turner's songs. "He turned to me in the middle of a song, when I was about to solo, and he said, 'You make me feel like I'm back in Kansas City.' Oh man, I thought, 'If die tonight, it's all done.' "

Vest's lifetime of musical adventure somehow seems evident on his East Meets Vest disc. The recording includes Turner's Low Down Dog, Memphis Slim's Wish Me Well, a handful of W.C. Handy songs and Vest's own compositions.

The playing is accomplished, gritty and soulful. The music swings.

It is, as Katie Webster once pointed out, the real deal.

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