

Jazz and blues piano player inspired by Roy Orbison

[Mike Devlin](#) / Times Colonist

February 19, 2013 05:31 PM



David Vest, who was recently named blues piano player of the year, will play Herman's Jazz Club Friday. Photograph by: BRUCE STOTESBURY, Times Colonist

If something's worth doing in the first place, there is no excuse for not getting it right.

That's the motto of Alabama native David Vest, a jazz and blues piano player now living in Victoria. Regardless of the peripherals — genre of music, type of venue, size of crowd — Vest's main priority is playing to the best of his ability every

time he steps on stage.

“I learned that from Roy Orbison,” Vest said Monday from his home in James Bay. “I don’t want to play anything I can’t feel authentic about. If it’s what I really believe is a great song, and I have feelings for it, I’ll do it.”

Vest, 69, has played professionally for more than 50 years, in locales stretching across North America. A highlight for Vest was opening for rock legend Roy Orbison in 1962, one of his many early accomplishments. Around the same time as his Orbison date, Vest recorded with country queen Tammy Wynette and joined the backing band of Big Joe Turner, widely acknowledged as the father of rock ‘n’ roll.

Vest credits his anything-goes ability to being a product of Birmingham, Alabama. Geographically speaking, it was the best place for a young gun to grow up. “It’s halfway between Kentucky and Louisiana. You’ve got Bill Monroe and bluegrass music in one ear, and New Orleans funk out of the other.”

His upbringing had its drawbacks, though, including racial segregation during that period. In his late teens and early 20s, he often witnessed outbursts of violence.

“I was in college in Birmingham during the civil-rights movement. I remember very vividly that going on, like the Sunday morning when [the Ku Klux Klan] blew up the 16th Street Baptist Church, and killed those four little girls.”

Vest has lived in Victoria since 2004, drawn by “a girl” named Annie Bowers he met at a show in Salem, Oregon. She’s now his wife of seven years.

Canada has been very good to Vest. He appeared on the most recent recordings by Vancouver Island bluesmen David Gogo and Bill Johnson, and spent time with Kenny (Blues Boss) Wayne in the supergroup Northwest Pianorama.

Last month, he was named piano player of the year at the 16th annual Maple Blues Awards in Toronto, one of the few venues to recognize the small but impressive blues scene in Canada. Vest did not expect to win the award, especially as an American by birth.

Vest is performing Friday at Hermann’s Jazz Club with drummer Billy Hicks and bassist Russell Jackson, two veterans of backing bands for Diana Krall and B.B. King, among others.

He needed two especially heavy players for his performance, a portion of which he’s dedicating to the late jazz piano king Dave Brubeck.

Vest saw Brubeck play in 1964 in what was the first integrated concert in Alabama history. He remembers the event being picketed by protesters from the Ku Klux Klan and White Citizens’ Council. Brubeck, for his part, made sure the gig went off without a hitch.

Many of his foremost musical experiences were jam sessions with black musicians — experiences which, due to strict segregation laws, were forbidden and illegal. Clandestine meetings were required in order to pull it off, Vest said.

The experiences have made him what he is today.

“When I was a teenager, I went to this juke joint along the Tennessee River, and got in there around 3 a.m. I shouldn’t have been allowed out of the house, much less in this club. People in there were just ignoring the rules of society — all ages, all races, shapes and sizes, just having a good time together on the dance floor. I remember looking at the band and thinking, ‘I would like to be able to make that happen.’ ”

Mission accomplished.

Where were you born and raised?

I was born in Huntsville, Alabama, but raised in Birmingham. Alabama was a cool place to be from for a piano player because all these legendary piano players had come out of there, like Sun Ra, W.C. Handy, Pinetop Smith.

At which point did you know Alabama was not for you in the long term?

I didn't know until I had left the state. I left in 1966, which is the last time I lived in Alabama, for Nashville. In 1968, I played my last show in Alabama. I often thought about going back, because I have people there I love. But it just never happened. Once I saw the West Coast, I sure wasn't going back.

When did you arrive in Victoria and what brought you here?

I moved up here in 2004, and became a permanent resident a couple of years after that.

At that time, I was living in Oregon and playing with the Paul deLay band. [Annie] was visiting Oregon and came to see a show. I wangled her email address and came up here for a cup of tea at Murchie's and it turned into a move to Canada.

What is your favourite thing about Victoria?

I like the fact I don't feel like I live in a blues ghetto. The interaction between the arts is really fabulous here. You can do a blues concert and not just get blues fans. The level of music is really high here. There are people in Victoria who aren't known in the States that are just unbelievable.

What is your greatest accomplishment as a person?

Surviving. I've been through some of the stuff that many musicians go through, problems I won't go into. But I've lived through that and came back around to do things right.

And as a professional?

When Paul deLay died, we had just recorded a live album that made it to the Top 10 in the Billboard blues charts. Paul hadn't been in the Top 10 for about 10 years, so we put him back where he belonged.

First album you purchased?

It was a gospel album by the Statesmen Quartet. My first blues album was I'm John Lee Hooker.

Favourite album?

Big Joe Turner's The Boss of the Blues.

He's got Pete Johnson playing boogie woogie piano on it, but he's also got the horn section from the Count Basie

Orchestra. It's the very definition of walking that line between blues and jazz.

First concert you attended?

I won't count a bunch of gospel shows my mother took me to, but those were great. My first concert would have been in 1957 or 1958, when I went to see Carl Perkins. Johnny Cash was on the show, too. When Perkins came out and opened with the first notes of Matchbox, my eyes have been open ever since. That guy tore the roof off the place.

Favourite concert you attended?

I went to a concert in 1961 at the National Guard armoury in Birmingham and saw Bill Black's combo with Duane Eddy and the Rebels. I haven't seen anything like that since then.

If you had one motto, or rule to abide by, what would it be?

"Every time out." The same level of commitment, professionalism and intensity every time you come and see one of my shows.

David Vest performs Friday at Hermann's Jazz Club (753 View St.) with Russell Jackson and Billy Hicks. Show is at 8 p.m. Tickets are \$18. For more information, visit davidvest.ca.

© Copyright Times Colonist