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## DAVE'S CORNER



Written by **Dave Harris**, who is a career musician (mostly busking), sometime writer for *Westcoast Blues Revue/Real Blues* magazines and author of the definitive book on one man bands – *Head, Hands & Feet*.

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**April 22, 2014**

### Interview: David Vest

I met pianist/singer David Vest not too long after he moved here from Portland. He subbed at one Slim & The Deuces gigs but I was a bit off that night. Still, we shared a great conversation about

Clarence Gatemouth Brown and I knew he was the real deal right away. With his long history in the music world David has seen a lot and it shows in his music, which draws on boogie-woogie, jump blues, blues, R&B, New Orleans, rock & roll, country, you name it. Since coming here, he's making major waves in the Canadian blues scene, working with the crème de la crème of Canadian blues, including Bill Johnson, David Gogo and members of Downchild Blues Band. On another personal note, I had a career moment playing Jimmy Reed with David on Hornby Island as part of their annual workshops. We are lucky to have David Vest in our city! He has a new CD just coming out, with a CD release party at Hermann's on Apr. 26! Get out and enjoy David's joyous blues and boogie!

**Dave Harris:** What are your first recollections of hearing blues music? When and where? Recordings? Live shows?

**David Vest:** I probably stumbled upon it trying to find black gospel music on the radio. Radio was big. We could get WLAC out of Nashville. That's where I heard a lot of blues. And a local radio station would let me have these newfangled 45 rpm records if they didn't want them. That's where I got my first John Lee Hooker single. They wouldn't play anything that sounded too black, and Hooker sounded blacker than coal dust and older than the earliest recorded music. This was all pretty early in life for me, because I remember going to see a movie called Pete Kelly's Blues in 1955, hoping it would have some blues in it. It didn't really. I had to wait for St. Louis Blues in 1958, starting Nat King Cole as W.C. Handy.

In those days, a few blues artists crossed over into the pop charts every year. I heard

Jimmy Reed and Lightnin' Hopkins on AM radio, in between Dean Martin and Gogi Grant cuts. And the big rhythm and blues package shows that toured all around back them still featured a few real blues acts. Kids would buy a ticket to see Sam Cooke or The Coasters and wind up seeing Jimmy Reed, Big Joe Turner, Big Mama Thornton and Bo Diddley.

There was a whole other world of blues that didn't cross over, and you had to go to a little more trouble to find it.

**DH:** Who influenced you to get into blues?

**DV:** I don't think I ever "tried" to play the blues. I just thought of myself as playing music, and that's what came out. Certainly seeing Jimmy Reed in the Fifties and meeting John Lee Hooker and Big Joe Turner had a big impact.

**DH:** As a kid in Alabama it must have been very different than for most of us. Can you tell us a bit of background about growing up in the south? Was blues on the radio?

**DV:** Blues music smelled like coal dust and red dirt to me. Modern country out of Nashville smelled like the feed store. And sounded like beer. My father's family were sharecroppers. He grew up walking behind a mule in the fields, barefoot in red dirt. Pretty much the only music he cared about was Bill Monroe. The big thing about growing up in the south was segregation. Which for me personally meant that I wasn't supposed to be around the people who had what I wanted. So blues music had an air of the forbidden about it. All anybody ever had to do was tell me not to do something, and off I went. But don't you think it's true that, no matter where you live, there's another world all around you that you'll never even see, unless you open your eyes.

**DH:** You've played with quite a few legends before you moved here. Tell us about some of them and how they influenced your development?

**DV:** The people I played with, from Big Joe Turner to Carey Bell and Hubert Sumlin, all taught me one thing: blues music is above all else a community. When you take up the blues, you are asking to be part of that community. It's not a secret society, anybody can come, but you have to respect it. And you have to come as you are. Forget all the myths. All the blues people I ever knew played the best instruments they could get, they played them in tune, and they wore their best clothes to perform in public, and they genuinely liked the people who came to hear them. In the old days, I learned all sorts of unwritten rules. Here's an example: unless you're at a jam session, where everybody signs up to play, you don't ever ask if you can sit in; you wait until you're invited. And when you do get invited, you don't jump onstage and play louder than the ones who extended you the invitation. You listen to what the other musicians are playing. Big Walter the Thunderbird used to say, "Why play in a band if you don't like to listen to music?" I know lots of things have changed, and there are different ways of doing things, but that's how I was taught.

**DH:** How did you end up in Portland and what was the scene like there?

**DV:** I moved there from Texas in 1999. Got robbed the day before I left. First person I called when I got to Portland was Jimmy T99 Nelson, and the first words he said were, "Do you need any money?" The Portland scene was amazing. Curtis Salgado, Lloyd Jones, Linda Hornbuckle, Duffy Bishop! And of course Paul deLay.

**DH:** Paul Delay, a master harp player and superb songwriter. You were his bandleader, right? What was he like? What were some of the best memories from that experience?

**DV:** We were co-leaders and we shared the front-man duties, but he was always the boss. He had a heart as big as his tone, and he was never too busy to stop and give some encouragement to a budding harmonica player. And he was a real trouper. He played some shows when he felt awful, and the audience never had any idea. To him, what they felt was more important than what he felt. We played together from Alaska to Mississippi, and not once did he ever bring less than his very best to the stage. I

don't know why more people don't cover his songs. On my new CD I have a song he and I wrote together about a crooked politician.

**DH:** How did you come to Victoria?

**DV:** I met a Canadian! It was my wife Annie who brought me up here.

**DH:** Since coming you've been doing quite well in the Canadian blues scene. Tell us about some of the highlights.

**DV:** It has been amazing. I am proud to be a part of the Canadian blues scene, and to have made so many dear friends. I guess the highlights would include winning a Maple Blues Award and getting a Recording of the Year nomination for East Meets Vest. And I'm really fortunate to have been asked to play on two Juno-nominated CDs by Bill Johnson and David Gogo. Joining the Cordova Bay family of artists was also a very big deal for me.

**DH:** The blues scene is smaller and whiter in Canada. How has that affected you?

**DV:** I look at it this way. Elvis was born in Tupelo. But when he grew up, he lived in Memphis. Tourists could visit his house in Tupelo, but there was no one at home. Elvis was up at Graceland having dinner with Ivory Joe Hunter. A lot of artists were "from" Alabama. Where did they go? We all know where the blues was born, but where does it live today? That's what interests me.

I think it's alive and well in Canada. When I moved up here, I was just following in the footsteps of Lonnie Johnson and Van Piano Man Walls and lots of others, from Ronnie Hawkins to Kenny Blues Boss Wayne. What I found up here feels more like the scene I was first attracted to than most places in the U.S. would feel to me today. For one thing, the boundaries aren't so rigid. An artist can play a jazz or folk festival one week and a blues gig the next. But here's the bottom line: If a young musician wanted to know what Jimmy Reed sounded like, I wouldn't send him to Austin. I'd send him to Dave Harris and Morgan Davis. You never got to see Big Joe Turner? Then go see Chuck Jackson and Downchild. None of these guys are imitators, they carry the real thing in their bones.

**DH:** A list of recordings would be nice, if you can?

**DV:** Since 2000:

- Way Down Here, 2003
- Serve Me Right To Shuffle, 2005
- The Last Of The Best (with Paul deLay), 2007
- Rock A While, 2009
- East Meets Vest, 2012
- Roadhouse Revelation, 2014 (out April 29 on Cordova Bay)

**DH:** What are your plans for the near future?

**DV:** Touring to promote my new CD on Cordova Bay, Roadhouse Revelation. And to listen to all sorts of music I'm not supposed to like.

**DH:** Any other thoughts?

**DV:** There are still lots of people out there who have never really had the chance to hear good blues played live. We need to look for ways to take our music to new audiences.

**DH:** Thanks David!

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