

21st century blues

Local band ready to wow them in Memphis

By MIKE ARNOLD
Chronicle Reporter

Five years ago, longtime club date musician Tom Zembko had just retired to Florida. Hoping to rekindle some of the magic he had for the past 30 years with his New York-based band, Zembko answered an audition call with Brian Beatty's Blues Prescription band.

He knew right away this was the band for him.

"He's a great band leader," he said of Beatty. "We clicked right away. He is really a perfectionist and extremely talented. He is someone I want to play with all the time."

"The guys in the band ... it is like the perfect match for all of us."

The members of Blues Prescription, based in Inverness, are: Beatty, band leader, lead vocals, guitar, songwriter; Zembko, keyboardist; Steve Reina, bass; Stephen Jackson, saxophonist and horns; and David Morgan, drums. In September, the band won the North Central Florida Blues Competition in Gainesville to earn their spot in the International Blues Challenge Jan. 7-11, 2025, on Beale Street in Memphis, Tennessee.

The band will be playing locally 7 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 7, at Twisted Wyne Wine and Beer Bistro across from the old courthouse in downtown Inverness.

Every member of the band is steeped in musical experience expected of a group who are all 60 years and older.

Beatty, 60, reached the semi-finals of the International Blues Challenge with his former band,



The five members of the Blues Prescription band, from left, are: Steve Reina, Tom Zembko, Brian Beatty, Stephen Jackson and David Morgan.

Blues Prescription

Columbus, Ohio-based Mojo Theory. Beatty says he thinks Blues Prescription is a "little better" and he "likes his chances of winning" this time.

A lifelong musician, Beatty learned the bass from jazz musician Tony Leonardi of the

Woody Herman Jazz Band. He then taught himself the guitar by "learning every Beatles song that was in existence."

Reina, 70, also learned his craft by listening to and playing Beatles music.

"Paul McCartney's style influ-

enced me," he said. "I used to play with Motown Records as a session studio player."

Reina moved to Florida three years ago from Maine and placed an ad in the paper looking for musicians.

"Brian contacted me and invit-

ed me over to jam with him and I did," he said. "When I first met Brian, I was intimidated. He was really good and a really good songwriter. I wasn't sure if I was going to go back or not. I went

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back because he was really, really good."

The band has an album of all-original music that is cut and nearing release. The tracks for the album were cut prior to the addition of Jackson and Morgan. Foghat's Roger Earl played drums on the upcoming album but left the band when Foghat began touring again after the release of their 2023 album, "Sonic Mojo."

Morgan, 61, joined the band as a fill-in for Earl and has been with them ever since.

"They were looking for a possible replacement," he said. "I tried it out and we all clicked and we have been practicing together since then."

He began playing drums at the age of 7 and put them away after getting married. He started playing again as his two boys got old enough to learn to play, and taught

them. After moving to Florida, he joined the Nature Coast Community Band where he met Jackson. Morgan said he believes this group has something special.

"We have a very good camaraderie together, good energy on and off the stage," he said. "It comes through in the music. Brian has written some really awesome songs. And we perform them well."

Jackson agrees, and believes the band has what it takes to win the International Blues Challenge.

"Having been in many bands through the years, I am extremely excited about what Brian has produced here with this group," he said. "Being all original music, it's very well written. It's not your standard 3/4 blues stuff. I feel very good about our possibilities of winning or scoring very highly in Memphis. We are going there to win. That is our attitude."

"It's the most mature group of musicians I have ever been a part of," he added. "Everyone's skill is

never questioned. It's the approach to the song. Never a question of ability, it's merely a question of architecture. There are no egos in this band, just a hard-working bunch of musicians."

Jackson, 75, began his musical journey in the seventh grade. He graduated with an engineering degree, but music continued to be part of his life. He played in the Navy band and spent 13 years with central Illinois-based band Rock of Ages that won several regional awards.

The band has dubbed their brand of music as 21st century blues.

"While it maintains all the elements of blues, it's got rock and jazz, and even Dixieland," Jackson said.

The music is all original, and written by Beatty. Morgan feels that sets them apart from other bands.

"We were the last band on," Morgan said of the Gainesville competition. "We watched all the other bands that came on before

us. They prefer all-original music. A number of the bands played a lot of covers. When we went on, everything we had was all original. It was all blues-based in structure. I think when the judges first heard us they went 'that's what we've been looking for'."

Beatty said he has always written music, but "hadn't really focused on getting my writing out to a mass audience" with his previous bands.

"After I was in Mojo Theory, some of my songs were very well-received at the IBC," he said. "After I moved here, I thought maybe I should write some more and get a band together and get this going."

Beatty has high aspirations for the future of the band.

"I want to get out there and play in the festival circuit," he said. "I have written songs for going on 50 years and never done anything with them. I was always apprehensive about letting them out there but it seems like anyone that hears them thinks they are really good. We will test that this year in Memphis."

"Ideally I would like to see the younger musicians pick up some of my songs as blues standards going forward."

Zembko, who volunteers as a music practitioner playing for hospital and dementia patients and their caregivers, says the music is inspirational and for him, has turned back time.

"Age is only a number," he said. "It is how you feel. This is something personally that will keep me going until I am 100 years old."

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