

Out and about

'Honeyboy' Edwards: life of blues 'paid off'

By Paul Ertelt
Of the Emerald

David "Honeyboy" Edwards has been singing the blues for more than half a century, and the list of musicians that he has known and worked with reads like a "Who's Who" of the blues.

"I knew them all," claims the 68-year-old singer and guitarist, whose career has taken him from the Mississippi Delta of the 1930s to Chicago's South Side of the 1950s.

Now, Edwards is on the road again as the featured performer of a blues revue touring the Northwest. The revue was in Eugene Saturday night for a performance at the Community Center for the Performing Arts, otherwise known as the W.O.W. Hall.

Born and raised in Mississippi, Edwards was first exposed to the blues as a teenager and was influenced by local singers such as Charley Patton and Tommy Johnson.

At 16, Edwards began playing with Tommy McClennan, whose "Deep Sea Blues" has become a standard of the genre. In the daytime they played on the streets for nickles and dimes, and at night they played in "bootleg houses," Edwards says.

Playing the blues meant escaping the harsh plantation life, where laborers picked cotton and baled hay for 70 cents to a dollar a day, he says.

"I wasn't going to work in the hot sun all day," Edwards says. "I learned to play the guitar and I lit out."

In the winter of 1932, he took to the road with Big Joe Williams, riding freight trains throughout Mississippi and Louisiana. Williams, who was about twice as old as Edwards, played a nine-string guitar that "sounded like a mandolin," he says.

But Williams had an "awfully quick temper," and when their partnership broke up, Edwards went to Memphis where he played for a time with the Memphis Jug Band.

"Memphis was the roughest place in the South," he says. "If you stayed in Memphis and you came out, you were all right."

In 1942 folklorist Alan Lomax recorded Edwards for the Library of Congress, and in 1952 Edwards traveled to Chicago to record for Chess Records. But his experience with record companies has not always been a happy one, he says.

In one instance, a Memphis studio

owner released one of Edwards' recordings under the name of another artist. "It was my voice, it was my guitar, but it had someone else's name on it," he says.

Edwards settled in Chicago in 1957, where he often played for \$10 a night. Though he never belonged to a regular band, Edwards worked in pickup bands with friends such as harmonica player Big Walter Horton.

During the mid 1960s, the original Fleetwood Mac came to Chicago to record with Otis Spann, saxophonist J.T. Brown and other musicians who had influenced them. The young British musicians also invited Edwards to the session.

"They heard of me somehow," he says. "I don't know where."

Edwards says he has heard few whites who can do justice to the blues. "A white man can play all right, but he can't never sing like us," he says.

During the 1970s, Edwards made his first of several trips to Europe, where he says the blues is very popular. After decades of struggling, his music is beginning to bring him recognition and financial rewards.

"We had a hard life, but it paid off."



Photo by Michael Clapp

David "Honeyboy" Edwards, blues performer for more than half a century, is currently touring the Northwest.

Play jabs the 'Big Four' with wit, sensitivity

There are four conversation topics that always manage to ignite a heated conversation between my grandfather, Tony, and me: sex, politics, religion and money. We can easily chat about Italian food and family intrigues, but when the talk turns toward any of the "Big Four," sparks fly and we argue relentlessly. It's nothing serious. He is simply a moderately conservative Republican, and I'm not. Enough said.

Unfortunately (or maybe fortunately) my grandfather isn't around to see and debate the merits of the Mainstage Theatre production of "Life is a Four-Letter Word" with me. I'm certain we both would agree, musically speaking, that some of the numbers in the original musical revue by Melina Neal, of Eugene, are great while others are disappointing. But the tone of the production is more in line with my thinking than Tony's. I'd spend my part of the discussion defending; he'd reciprocate with blasts.

One thing is for certain: "Life" effectively addresses those four topics, as well as other more minor themes, and most often does it with variety, sensitivity and intelligence. Strict attention is paid to balance; the songs are hilarious and witty when appropriate and somber when necessary.

Neal has blended the problems of eternity into a neat package for the '80s. And while inside "Eugene" jokes probably would make the production less effective outside this city, the messages delivered in and bet-

ween the lines are universal.

The first is the strongest of the two acts; the numbers in Act I mainly deal with sex, love, politics, women's rights and personal identity. T. K. McDonald's touching rendering of "Doatsie Mae" is chillingly truthful. It's the story of an ineffectual dreamer who's always wanted excitement and adventure "like the women on TV" but, for some reason, is unable to get it.

Two consecutive songs, "Politics and Poker" ("Shuffle up the cards and find the joker") and "Side Step," are both crowd pleasers. Dan Bruno, of "On The Edge" fame, does a terrific job as the sneaky politician in the latter; his dancing is hilarious but polished, and his facial expressions can't be topped by anyone in the cast.

"Why Am I Me?" asks the eternal question marvelously. Andrew Sherman and Katherine Kersey, the youngest cast members, are highlighted perfectly here; after all, youth ask that particular question most often. The two exude honest puzzlement and sincerity and at the same time give the audience a few chuckles.

There are weak spots. "Love Sing," for example, is full of sloppy sentimentalism. And while songs such as "Freedom" ("Freedom is a state of mind"), "Motherhood March" and "Watching the Big Parade" all highlight female cast members singing for the women's equal rights movement, the absence of men in those numbers is a blatant oversight.

Act II deals with money, sexual freedom, religion and civic duty. "Rhythm of Life," featuring Ken Brownell and including almost the entire cast, is the highlight. Offbeat, alternative religions are surveyed in the light, upbeat number. Ridicule is not lost but is not stressed.

Another Act II tune, "Married Couple Seeks Married Couple," is a slow-paced, rather enigmatic song dealing with partner switches. While I appreciate and understand that a melancholic tone may have been used to project confusion and uneasiness, a livelier, I thought a more snappy tune could have added an adventurous touch. But maybe adventure isn't what those folks need; I've never been married.

Sherie L. Blankenship and Joe Zingo should be commended for the choreography, which fits well with the songs' lyrics. The sound system's effectiveness could be more uniform, and the cast needs some polishing so the members aren't looking to each other for stage directions. But, all in all, the production runs smoothly.

"Life is a Four-letter Word" plays Thursday and Friday and August 3, 9, 11 and 17 on the downtown mall near the fountain. Call the Mainstage Theatre Co. for reservations. Watching the performance is a nice way to spend a summer evening — with or without Grandfather.

By Kim Carlson

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