

Northwest band makes it big on international music scene

By Stan Nelson
Of the Emerald

Good things come to those who wait. And for Robert Cray, his time has come after 13 years. The Northwest Bluesman and his band appear on the verge of international acclaim and recognition, bringing his unique style of blues to a mainstream audience.

The European label Polygram Records is distributing Cray's third album, "Strong Persuader," and the American label Mercury Records is distributing the album in the United States.

For Cray, success has not come easy. "There's been a lot of hard work put into it traveling around all these years and also a little luck combined with that," he says. The deal, which was completed this summer while the band was still recording the album, ensured more support and time as the band went back to the studio to record for the album for an additional three months.

Hightone, which recorded and produced Cray's first two albums, has retained recording and production responsibilities in the deal, which Cray says is to the band's advantage.

The Robert Cray Band has come a long way. From the initial idea for a band, formed after Cray saw Texas guitarist Albert Collins in 1969, a group with the nucleus of Cray and bassist Richard Cousins eventually became Collins' touring band, and their reputation has since spread quickly.

The band now includes Cousins, keyboardist Peter Boe and drummer David Olson.

By 1978, the band cut the album "Who's been Talkin'" on a now-defunct record label. Five years later, the band released "Bad Influence," and in 1985, "False Accusations" on Hightone, earning the respect of many veteran performers.

Cray's greatest satisfaction thus far, though, has been his work with Muddy Waters and the 11 W.C. Handy awards presented to the band by the Memphis National Blues Foundation for Blues and Rhythm and Blues artists.

Cray's "Bad Influence" won an unprecedented four W.C. Handy Awards: Best Contemporary Album, Single of the Year, Song of the Year (both for "Phone Booth" from the album) and Best Contemporary Male Blues Artist.

Newsweek magazine counted "False Accusations" among the best of the year. The National Association of Independent Record Distributors awarded the album the Best Blues Album honors.

The reputation and the media attention the band has been receiving, while a heavy load to carry, have provided satisfaction, he says.

"The material that we do, sometimes it shows and it is nice. Recognition is an all-around kind of thing — the music and the performance," Cray says.



Robert Cray

"Hopefully (the band will be recognized as) more than just bluesmen because we enjoy playing all sorts of things — and the blues. Since we started writing all of our material, it's a combination of all the things we have liked in the past and still do," from blues covers to James Brown originals, Cray explains.

Cray and the band will begin a 17-date southeast tour of the United States opening for Huey Lewis and the News on Jan. 28 before heading to Europe, Japan and Australia promoting their new album.

In their last trip to Europe in July, Cray met up with Eric Clapton and Phil Collins who were playing at a jazz festival in Switzerland.

"Prior to that, we had found out Eric invited us to be on that tour so we ended up playing four of those dates," as the opening act as part of a six-day tour, he says. Cray's band also performed with Clapton and Collins in France and Birmingham, England.

"We got along fairly well, and we had a real good time and also got to get on stage and jam with the cats three of the nights," he says.

Clapton is reported to have recorded Cray's tune "Bad Influence" and plans to release the cut on his upcoming album.

Cray's first encounter with Mick Jagger occurred in November 1985 when Jagger came backstage at a performance at the Hammersmith Odeon in London. "We were all pretty much shocked because he just walked into our dressing room as we walked in, too, before the show.

"We turned around, and there's Mick Jagger in the dressing room, and nobody knew what to say to him. We asked him, 'What are you doing here?' and he goes, 'Well, I was just in the neighborhood, and I thought I'd just pop by,'" Cray says.

The two met again in April of this year to

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film a self-consciously stylish look to help shape the screenplay (by Howard Ashman, who wrote the book for the stage production). The story and screenplay are a parody of 1960s clichés and of musical form itself.

The direction, in fact, is far better than one has a right to expect. Oz's fluid, gliding camera is both effective and stylish and his compositions, utilizing windows and other framing bric-a-brac, draw the stories of Seymour and Audrey together even as the cinematic space itself separates them.

The film's minor failure comes in its conclusion. Up to the final 15 minutes, the film is an acute satire of triteness. From that point on, it simply becomes trite. The black humor of the original film and the musical adaptation are partially circumvented to give the couple

a happy ending, but even the slickly handled pyrotechnics and final satirical dig at the '60s can't stop the last-minute heroics from feeling like an unrecognized cliché.

This minor flaw doesn't stop the film from being funny, energetic and clever. The kitchy acting is perfectly at home in the self-conscious indulgence that defines this musical parody. Even Rick Moranis, who has a poor movie track record, pulls off a funny performance. Ellen Green is outstanding, and the Greek-like chorus girls, Crystal, Ronette and Chiffon, are cleverly incorporated. Best of all is Audrey II, a fully articulated character in every sense of the word, even if it is a puppet. Levi Stubbs of the Four Tops provides the menacing baritone voice.

Although not up to "Rocky Horror" standards, "The Little

Shop of Horrors" is a cleverly flamboyant comedy with a solid rock-and-roll soundtrack and a great screenplay. It could have been a disaster, but almost everything works wonderfully. Surely this film can't please everybody, but those with a penchant for wit, stylishness and rock-and-roll should find "Little Shop of Horrors" a delight.

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