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The Roadhouse Roosters, a blues and boogie trio, are part of the Hudson Valley Blues Society.

Singing the blues

Hudson Valley group releases 'Lockdown Sessions' CD

BY ABBY LUBY
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Once you hear the blues, you don't forget it. Joyous or sad, the music draws raw emotion from the heart and it runs through your veins. It's those vocal croons, soulful guitar twangs, low thumping piano chords and the steady pulse of drums.

The blues is steeped in southern African-American history and many devotees want to ensure the genre is not forgotten. Keeping the blues alive means regular performances and more recordings—a mission long embraced by well-established blues foundations, blues societies, and blues halls of fame all over the world.

Two years ago, those passionate about hearing and playing more blues here in the Hudson Valley formed the Hudson Valley Blues Society (HVBS). The group just released its first, two-disc CD, "Blues Alive in the Valley—Lockdown Sessions of 2020," featuring 23 original songs by known music celebrities of the Hudson Valley.

The CD marks a pivotal point

for HVBS. The serendipitous start of the nonprofit group was like an improvised riff in B.B. King's "The Thrill Is Gone," with chance meetings of like-minded folks seeking to organize. Today, they are active board members working to keep the blues alive for its 120 members.

"It wasn't primarily about forming a group for people to get gigs," said HVBS president Paul Toscano, a Patterson resident who sings and plays a mean harmonica on the track "Turn up the Heat." "It was more about being a performance society to help people understand the blues, which seems to be a dying art."

Toscano used to have a blues show on Pawling Public Radio before it became a streamed internet station. The show airing before his was Jacque Roche's "Jacque's Giant Hudson Valley Music Show," during which she regularly interviewed Hudson Valley musicians performing at local venues.

"Paul and I got to know each other and he invited me to hang out and listen to the blues," recalled Roche, a Somers resident

and vice president of HVBS. "Learning about the blues was a lot of fun."

Roche, who professionally books local musicians to open for national touring bands, saw the potential in starting a blues society. About the same time, Toscano met Hillary Fontana, an avid blues lover who frequented legendary rhythm and blues cruises featuring top-notch performers, many of whom she got to know at late-night jam sessions on the boat. Fontana, an artist, graphic designer, and professional website designer, contacted Toscano about a musician friend's lost piece of musical equipment at a local venue.

"Paul asked me if I ever wanted to start a blues society," said Fontana, who lives in New Rochelle. "We didn't know each other at all, but the friendship blossomed from there. Paul knew all the local musicians in the Hudson Valley."

Fontana is now the corresponding secretary on the HVBS board. She designed and set up the HVBS website and created the CD cover.

Everything started around

November 2018 with emails to Hudson Valley musicians and music lovers, inviting them to an informal first meeting of HVBS. Responding to that email was Bill McCann, an IBM retiree and lifelong amateur musician who played folk, rock, and oldies.

"I was at a point in my life where I wanted to give back to the community," said McCann. "The meeting was in Brewster, which is where I live."

McCann didn't know much about the blues, but his appreciation grew the more he heard and learned about it.

"It was an opportunity to be a part of an organization and to meet lots of really good blues players."

McCann, now the group's treasurer, said HVBS is financially stable.

"We received some large donations from various members pretty early in our existence. Funds were set aside to help musicians who are needy," said McCann, referring to the Ian Bennett Memorial Fund, which helps Hudson Valley musicians struggling with medical and

health-related financial needs.

Bennett, who died in 2019, was a singer, saxophone, and harmonica player for over 40 years, an HVBS member, and a New York State Blues Hall of Fame inductee.

Opening the doors of his church for HVBS meetings and jam sessions was Tim Wagner, pastor of the Croton Falls Community Church for 28 years. He learned about HVBS from Fontana, with whom he had worked. Wagner became so enthused about the blues, he scheduled a Sunday morning blues service that featured the group Agape.

"They sang the blues version of about eight songs, including 'Amazing Grace' and 'Power in the Blood,'" Wagner recalled. "The music was moving, soul-searching, and provided a depth to our worship."

Wagner said that since that service, several members of his congregation had joined the blues society.

One of the primary goals of HVBS is to preserve the history of the blues. In the late 1800s,

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BLUES

FROM PAGE 3

songs sung by southern Black sharecroppers, slaves, and ex-slaves were clearly the sonorous linchpin of the blues. These songs, usually of anguish and despair, were the impromptu blues heard in plantation camps, rural juke joints, and shacks before spreading north of the Mississippi Delta, evolving into the Delta blues, Chicago blues, jazz-blues hybrids and later on, rhythm and blues and rock-and-roll.

That HVBS is not as diverse as it could be is not lost on Toscano.

“We’re all white people playing music that wasn’t invented by us, but it’s music we embrace and love. Truth is, without Black people, this music never would have happened. We are trying to

attract people of color,” Toscano said, adding that the group is reaching out to such Black Hudson Valley blues celebrities as Joe Louis Walker, the electric blues guitarist and singer/songwriter, and the award-winning blues guitarist Slam Allen.

Attracting young musicians to the blues society is another challenge and it has a few younger members. Acknowledging that more young people are embracing and playing the blues is HVBS member and blues guitarist Al Orlo, who said the youths he sees playing the blues are learning about it through social media.

“They are speaking the language. You can hear it in the depth of their listening and in their playing and they are impressive. These young blues mu-

sicians have done their research,” said Orlo.

Orlo, who grew up in White Plains and now lives in northern Westchester, has long worked and played guitar with soul blues artist, Vaneese Thomas; his sultry, expressive guitar accompanies Thomas’ soul-gripping voice on the CD’s track “Mean World.”

As HVBS became better known, it booked musicians to open for well-known groups at such venues as Daryl’s House Club in Pawling, Hopewell Inn in Hopewell Junction, Lucy’s in Pleasantville, Turning Point in Piermont, the Moonlight Café in Brewster, and the Falcon Underground, Marlboro, among others.

By the beginning of 2020, HVBS was inducted as an affiliate of the Memphis-based Blues Foundation, a major player in the blues world that holds the annual, highly competitive International Blues Challenge (IBC). HVBS was planning its own local blues challenge whose winners would compete against other blues artists from all over the world at the January 2021 IBC. It was also planning its second annual fundraiser.

Then the pandemic hit and everything shut down—venues closed and the group’s monthly meetings moved onto Zoom.

“Everyone was in a state of

flux; some were writing and recording new music,” said Roche. “We had to revive the group and get our members out of a slump. That’s when we decided to produce the CD.”

An aggressive outreach campaign solicited Hudson Valley blues musicians to contribute a song. Stamped as “Lockdown Sessions of 2020,” the CD production was headed up by HVBS trustee Tom Forst, an international touring and chart-selling original blues artist. Among the 23 tracks, the CD features Vaneese Thomas, Dion, the Johnny Feds Band, Menza Madison Band, Union Stockyard & Transit Company, Tas Cru with Sonny Rock, the Full Stop Blues Band, and Roadhouse Roosters. To date, over 120 CDs have been sold at \$20 each.

When the pandemic is over, the collective hope is to pick up where HVBS left off, promoting musicians to play more live shows, essential to the vibe that refuels the core of artistic sustenance.

“When we play, there is a feedback loop with the audience and sometimes you can feel their pleasure and that amplifies the experience,” said Orlo. “It’s a great feeling.”

For more information or to purchase a CD, visit thehvbs.org.