

# When the Blues came to Yorkville

By the end of the 1960s, Toronto was a blues town. Bands like Whiskey Howl, Downchild and McKenna-Mendelson Mainline were maintaining a strong presence on the local live scene. The gradual adoption of blues music in Toronto was most visible in two entertainment districts: the Yonge Street strip between Queen and College Streets, and Yorkville Village, a formerly residential area roughly bounded by Bloor, Avenue, Davenport and Yonge. Blues music would come to both Yorkville Village and the Yonge Street strip, but in different ways.

Modern rhythm and blues clubs, like Club Bluenote (372 Yonge) beginning in 1960, would be one vehicle for the establishment of homegrown Toronto blues. The other would be the folk and jazz coffeehouses of Yorkville Village. Beginning in 1955 and accelerating in 1960, Yorkville Village would host a series of unlicensed coffeehouses along Avenue Road, Yorkville Avenue and to a lesser extent Cumberland Avenue and Bloor Street. Often these establishments presented, for a small admission charge, live folk music or, to a lesser extent, small jazz bands. The urban folk revival was growing in popularity in the late fifties and early sixties. The "Great Folk Scare" would peak around 1963 and would make stars of Bob Dylan, Joan Baez and Peter, Paul and Mary, not to mention Canadians Ian and Sylvia and Gordon Lightfoot. Blues would piggyback on the folk revival in Toronto, and Yorkville would become both a major destination for touring acts and a breeding ground for a homegrown blues scene.

Toronto's earliest coffeehouses with live music, the Concerto Cafe (1955-58) and La Coterie (1956-65), seem not to have featured blues musicians per se. Beginning in 1960,



*Lonnie Johnson performing at the Penny Farthing, 1965 or '66.*

coffeehouse openings would become more frequent. The Village Corner at 174 Avenue Road (1960-66) is best remembered as an early home for Gordon Lightfoot and Ian and Sylvia, but the venue featured blues performers occasionally, including touring artists Rev. Gary Davis and Jesse Fuller as well as local performers Al Cromwell and Stan Thomas. Al Cromwell, whose roots were in a Nova Scotia black Loyalist township, grew up singing doo-wop on street corners in the west end of Toronto before taking up the guitar and reinventing himself as a country bluesman. Stan Thomas is remembered by David Clayton-Thomas as "a strong force in Yorkville. Great blues singer. We both briefly used the name "Sonny" but he won. After all, he was about 6'4" and 220 lbs...big guy!"

The Purple Onion (35 Avenue Road) opened in November 1960 and was booking live folk music by April 1961. Local performers like Ian and Sylvia and Jim McCarthy dominated until early in 1962, when touring singers Judy Collins and David Crosby began to appear for week-long stints or longer. From this point until the opening of the Riverboat in

1964, the Onion was to be the premier venue for touring American blues artists. Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, Josh White Jr., Mark Spoelstra, John Hammond Jr., and Rev. Gary Davis are among the American blues performers who appeared. Not all of the black artists who appeared specialized in blues; the singer-actor Brock Peters performed blues alongside spirituals, work songs, poems and even selections from Porgy and Bess.

John McHugh's Half Beat (1960-1962 at 183 Cumberland, 1962-1966 at 47 Avenue Road) began to offer live music in 1964 with a mix of folk music (including the Toronto debut of Joni Anderson - soon to be Joni Mitchell - in November of that year), traditional jazz, and on occasion solo blues performers. Joe Mendelson, later of blues-rock band McKenna-Mendelson Mainline, played and sang acoustic blues there in 1964. In the summer of 1965, German emigre John Kay was performing solo blues at the Half Beat as well. By the fall Kay would be snapped up by R&B/pop group the Sparrows as a second guitarist and singer; the group, reformed as Steppenwolf, would have massive popular



Bare Knuckles & Brawn hits #2 on Earshot!

"It's part haunting, part joyous and sneakily infectious."  
Jim Hynes, Elmore Magazine

For a band that so freely reaches back into the tradition, be it blues, jazz, freak-folk, swing or ragtime, Blue Moon Marquee is entirely unique - Fervor Coulee, Roots Music Opinion

Listen/Buy here:  
[www.BlueMoonMarquee.com](http://www.BlueMoonMarquee.com)

success in the late sixties and early seventies.

McHugh's next venture, The Penny Farthing (110-112 Yorkville, 1963-68/9) tended more towards local talent, like Al Cromwell, Stan Thomas and Jackie Washington. Hamiltonian Jackie Washington, whose career began in the 1930s, appeared at the club in the winter of 1965, singing "blues and ballads." In 1966 the Penny Farthing began to occasionally book touring blues acts like John Hammond Jr., Josh White Jr. and John Lee Hooker. But perhaps the most significant blues musician to play at the Penny for an extended period was the legendary guitarist-singer Lonnie Johnson.

New Orleans-born Lonnie Johnson cut classic recordings in the 1920s alongside Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong, then reemerged after the war as a smooth R&B balladeer with "Tomorrow Night." The New Gate of Cleve (1961-65 at 161 Dupont, then 1965-66 at 45 Avenue Road, where they began booking touring acts) had presented Mississippi John Hurt, Sleepy John Estes and Son House when they booked Johnson. After that sparsely attended May 1965 debut, Lonnie Johnson would soon find a home at the Penny Farthing. He would also make Toronto his home for the rest of his life, renting a room at 181 Avenue Road. He would record an album with Jim McHarg's Metro Stompers that combined blues with traditional New Orleans jazz and for six weeks or so in the summer of 1966, he would take over the Left Bank (107 Yorkville) coffeehouse and rename it The Home of the Blues. Lonnie would play clubs around Toronto including Steele's Tavern and Castle George until his death in 1970.

In 1964, former coffee salesman Bernie Fiedler established two folk venues in Yorkville: the Mousehole and the Riverboat. The Mousehole, an aptly named small venue at 106 Yorkville, featured occasional acoustic blues from Jackie Washington and Al Cromwell up to its 1968 demise. The longest-lived of the Yorkville coffeehouses, the basement-level Riverboat (1964-1978) seated almost 120 patrons and maintained a folk music policy that included both local and touring acts. Beginning in December 1965 with Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee and then Josh White Jr., blues acts occasionally appeared at the Riverboat. In the summer of 1967 Junior Wells backed by Buddy Guy made a memorable appearance, followed by John Lee Hooker in 1968.

By 1963, coffeehouses had proliferated in Yorkville Village, with folk music and traditional jazz the usual fare. But beginning in 1964, all of this would change. The success of the Beatles revitalized rock music and inspired thousands of young people to take up instruments and start bands. The ensuing "British Invasion" opened North American

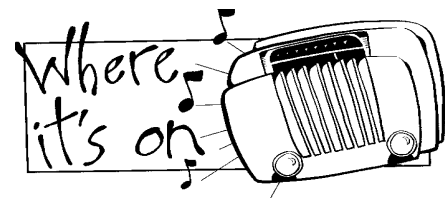
ears to the thriving London R&B scene. Young bands like the Rolling Stones, the Animals, the Yardbirds and John Mayall's Bluesbreakers popularized a raw blues style that appealed to rock-weaned teenagers looking for hard-rocking blues with folk authenticity.

The renewed popularity of rock, R&B and blues also had a transformative effect on live music in Yorkville. By September 1964, the Inn On The Parking Lot at 158 Cumberland Street had changed its booking policy from folk and jazz to rhythm-and-blues and rock'n'roll, and by 1965, as Charlie Brown's (1965-66), the house band was the snarling, Rolling Stones influenced Ugly Ducklings. Following the Stones and other British and American bands, the Ducks were playing mostly blues and rhythm and blues, albeit at rock band volume and instrumentation. Soon, former folk and jazz bastions like the Purple Onion would switch to R&B with the blues-rock of Luke and the Apostles. This pioneering band, fronted by Luke Gibson and featuring the Clapton-influenced lead guitar of Mike McKenna, would set the tone for a blues renaissance in Toronto the Good.

The transformation of Yorkville music away from folk and jazz to rhythm and blues and rock would plant the seeds of its demise as an entertainment district. The new music would bring young people to Yorkville in mobs beginning around 1965, and by 1967 the large numbers of hippies, bikers and street kids in the area were causing a moral (and financial) panic among the landlords and allied local politicians like Allan Lamport. After a campaign of heavy-handed policing and the steady raising of rents, by 1968 Yorkville as a live music destination was in danger. The long and ultimately successful process of Yorkville gentrification was underway.

- Mike Daley

*Author's note: This article comes out of my research for an upcoming lecture series for Curious Minds at Ted Rogers Hot Doc Theatre beginning January 9 and continuing for six weeks every Thursday at 1 pm. More information at <https://bit.ly/2syfza9>. For my research, I have relied heavily on Doug Harper's excellent compilation and analysis of live music listings for Yorkville coffeehouses at [yorkvillecoffeehouses.org](http://yorkvillecoffeehouses.org). I have also consulted Rob Bowman and Daniel Tate's recent book *The Flyer Vault, Mark Miller's Way Down That Lonesome Road, my own extensive interviews of participants in the scene, and a variety of documentary sources, including city directories and Toronto newspaper archives. This work is part of my ongoing research for a history of the Yorkville and Yonge St. music scenes from the late 1950s through 1968. I welcome any corrections or suggestions at [mikedaley@gmail.com](mailto:mikedaley@gmail.com).**



CBC Radio One (99.1)  
*Saturday Night Blues*,  
w/ **Holger Petersen** (national)  
Saturday 9:05pm-11:00pm  
(on Radio 2 Saturday at 6:05pm),



JAZZ-FM (91.1)  
*Bluz FM* w/ **Danny Marks**  
Saturday 8:00 pm-midnight



CIUT-FM (89.5)  
*A to Z Blues* w/ **Screamin' Red**  
Saturday 8-9am  
*John Valenteyn's Blues*  
w/ **John Valenteyn**  
Friday 1-2pm



*At The Crossroads* w/ **Brant Zwicker**  
<http://atcb Blues.ca> and syndicated on  
stations across the continent)

CKWR (98.5 FM)  
*Old Chicago Blues* w/ **Willy A**,  
Friday 10:30 pm-midnight (Waterloo)

CIOI FM (101.5 The HAWK)  
*Blues Blast*, with **Ken Wallis**  
Tuesdays, 4-6pm (Hamilton)



COUNTYFM (99.3)  
*Sideroads* with **Blues Sister Peg** and  
**Brotha 'Z'** Tuesday 8-10pm (Picton)



CIWS 102.9FM (WhiStle Radio)  
*Whistle Bait* w/ **Gary Tate**  
(aka Shakey-T) Sat 12-1am and Wed  
10-11 pm. (Stouffville)



CFFF Trent Radio (92.7 FM)  
*Blues Themes*, Delivered by...The Milkman.  
Every Thursday night 9 to 10 PM

CJLX (91.3 FM)  
*Saturday Night Blues Review*, with **George Vaughan**.  
Saturday 6-7pm (Belleville)

CFMU (99.3 FM)  
*Breakfast of Champions*, with **Paul Panchezak**. Thurs 10am  
*Swear to Tell the Truth: the Blues and Rhythm Show*, with  
**C.M.Compton**. Tuesday 1-2:30pm (Hamilton)

CFRU (93.3 FM)  
*The Thrill is Back* with **Andy and Andrew** Mondays 1 to 3pm  
*The Blues Review*, with **Roopen Majithia** Tues 9:00 pm (Guelph)

CANOE FM (100.9 FM) canoe.fm.com  
*Buckle Up Blues Cruise* with Patrick Monaghan Tues. (7-9pm)  
(Haliburton)

CFBU (103.7 FM) *Eclectic Blues* with **Deborah Cartmer**  
Tuesday 7-9 pm (St. Catharines)

CKCU(93.1 FM) [www.ckcufm.com](http://www.ckcufm.com) *Black and Blues* w/ **John Tackaberry** Every Sunday 9-11 pm (Ottawa)

CKMS (100.3 FM)  
*Poor Folk Blues* w/ **Bruce Hall** (aka Brewski)  
Monday 7:30-9 pm (Waterloo)