



World on a String

WITH GLOBAL ATTENTION GROWING, HAMILTON BLUESMAN STEVE STRONGMAN PLAYS IT COOL

Anyone who spends long enough watching live music knows that inspiration is a relatively rare commodity, and the element of surprise – even in the age of the gimmick – scarcer still. But every so often you can be taken aback by a talent, sometimes simply because they've chosen a personal path, paying their dues on the margins of the spotlight before staking a claim on centre stage. That seems to be the case with local blues artist Steve Strongman. His nimble, searing guitar, keening harmonica playing and plaintive, soulful vocals evoke the skills of a master and the fresh astonishment of stumbling on raw talent. And that's often how you catch Strongman – rooted in the blues classics and soaring beyond genre. It's a virtuosity and flexibility that comes from the fact that the man has done his homework and more than his share of roadwork. Strongman launched his career at 16, playing the Southern Ontario club circuit before touring extensively with a string of rock, country and blues stateside.

Returning to his hometown of Kitchener, he formed the alt-rock band Plasticine alongside singer-songwriter Rob Szabo, a one-two punch that landed them a small army of fans and a deal with the short-lived Song Corporation label. When that imprint folded, the band dissolved and Strongman again returned to a sideman role as lead guitarist for Kazzer. All the while, however, he was nourishing his first love, the blues, playing solo in pubs and clubs around the region and discovering just how deep the music went in him. As it turned out, pretty deep. Growing up in Kitchener meant that he was exposed to a live music circuit that fostered the blues, booking some of the best blues artists in the world. And of course there was Mel Brown, a blues giant who had played in the house band at legendary Austin Texas venue Antone's; Brown moved to Kitchener in 1990 and made it his home, looming large over Strongman, eventually becoming a mentor to the young guitarist.

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"For me to have a mentoring relationship with Mel Brown, I certainly don't think I'd be doing what I'm doing today if it weren't for him," Strongman says. "He was the biggest blues artist in the world to me, bigger than BB King or Buddy Guy or anybody because he was right there and he was that good." This year, the Grand River Blues Society presented Strongman with the Mel Brown Blues Award, an honour that leaves him almost speechless.

Strongman moved to Hamilton in the late '90s to marry his wife, Meredith, a Hamilton native (with whom he now has two children, ages 1 and 4). Blissful as his life was, the blues travelled with him. Eventually, the call of the blues became undeniable, and the guitarist made it his obsession, emerging with 2007's *Honey*, his polished debut blues release. The album, packed with Strongman originals, was a near-effortless shot of cool, crackling blues shot through with the guitarist's agile, searing fretwork and an expansive palette of styles, all carried off with seamless confidence.

The disc earned him local applause (four nominations at the 2007 Hamilton Music Awards) as well as national renown (a Maple Blues Award nomination for Guitarist of the Year). It also marked a break from the pubs and clubs, and focused him on ticketed shows and soft-seat venues, as he and his band (bassist Alec Fraser and producer-drummer Dave King) toured top blues clubs in western Canada and made inroads with the festival set. That path that produced a remarkable follow-up, this year's *Blues In Colour* (which has won another four HMA nominations and a Maple Blues Award nomination for Guitarist of the Year). It has also revealed its share of surprises along the way – such as a francophone fan base.

"The last two years I've played the Montreal Jazz Festival and I've been extremely well-received. My agent is based out of Montreal and we started getting myself into different circles there and it has gone extremely well. So I've been working on my French," he laughs. "Which people in Quebec seem to really appreciate and enjoy." Strongman played this summer at the main stage of the Montreal Jazz Festival, to 25,000 people, and from that exposure he has pegged a number of shows trailing up into northern Quebec and Gaspé.

"Quebecers seem to hold music in a higher regard than the rest of Canada does. I did a show last week, and I always ask, how many people have ever seen me play before. You're

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in a venue that holds maybe 175 people, and it's a sold-out gig, and one person has seen me perform. In Ontario, that's unlikely to happen unless you're a much more established artist. In Quebec, it seems like people seem more interested in seeing something they've never seen before, more open to new music."

Another surprise for fans of Strongman's early days is that he has recently returned to the clubs, playing an acoustic Sunday night residency at Slainte Irish Pub to keep himself limber between theatre dates. Although his move away from clubs is not one he regrets, he is thankful for the role that those years continue to play in his artistic development. "I love to play live," Strongman enthuses. "But a while ago I stopped playing bars because I wanted to focus on theatre shows and ticketed events, and that's worked really well for me. But those shows don't happen all of the time, so you either have to be touring all the time or you need anchor dates at home that you can still stay sharp with. Shows like Slainte help me stay really sharp; I get to try new material and use it as a writing tool. I can see which songs are working and which aren't, which leaves me ready when I get higher-profile shows like opening for Buddy Guy or Joe Cocker."

To say that those marquee opening slots have been invigorating would be an understatement. Aside from the highwire act of opening for certified legends, the exposure has given Strongman renewed confidence in his chosen path. His appeal seems to transcend borders, too. Strongman's sophomore album has caught the attention of blues lovers the world over. He's had a lot of airplay in Russia, Scandinavia and beyond, and with the radio support and online CD sales in Europe, it will be his next big focus. The U.S. is another natural. Strongman went to Memphis recently as part of the International Blues Challenge, a trip that yielded an agency in the States that was impressed with what he was doing. Strongman has been talking with them about the possibilities, but for now he's been content to make do with the odd one-off. Emphasis on odd.

"I did a private party for Catharine Zeta-Jones and Michael Douglas. That was very strange - getting flown on a private plane to Nantucket to go and do a private party for them," he confesses, pausing briefly as if to replay the experience. He simply smiles. "It was... interesting." **HM**



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