

Chuck Beattie's Blues

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After finishing a fifth encore at England's Bury Blues Festival in 2003, **Chuck Beattie** was filled with emotion. "I just couldn't go back out," Chuck says from his rehearsal space off of Hendersonville Road in Asheville. "I was too emotional. It was very humbling."

As he tells the story you can see the emotion is still strong inside Chuck - or "Dr. Blues" as he's often called. (He has a Ph.D. in statistics from Florida State University.) It was a career highlight, and a time to remember his past.



"I was thinking about two little boys from rural North Carolina," Chuck says, "and how one of them made it to this great moment." He was headlining a blues festival. The crowd loved him - couldn't get enough of his music. He was on top of the world.

But memories of his brother and of his roots spun through his mind. He and his brother Gerald began playing music together as kids in Burgaw, near where their father worked at Camp Lejeune. Their father walked in one day with a drum book, drum pad, and drumsticks. A music teacher who traveled the county taught the boys the rudiments of drumming.

Gerald kept on drumming but Chuck, heavily influenced by Louis Armstrong, started playing the next-door neighbor's cornet. The two boys were off on a musical adventure. The family moved to Raleigh and then Rocky Mount. Gerald added instruments such as trombone, baritone horn, and tuba. Chuck began to play the bass. They were in the school band and they started going to the nearby Red Budd Holy Church led by Rev. F.C. Barnes "because they had guitars." By their early teens they had formed their first group: The Vagabonds.

Chuck was already immersed in music when, at 15 years old, the school's radio club took a field trip to a local radio station. There Chuck met Charles O. Johnson who told the young music and radio enthusiast to come back and he'd give him a job. "I became his assistant," Chuck says. That entailed numerous menial tasks but it eventually included pulling records for Charles. "I would spend hours reading the liner notes of the albums learning everything I could about the music and the people who made it."

Charles went on to start Goldleaf Records and was a godfather of the Carolina Soul sound. Chuck was then recruited to form a band to back up some of the artists that came through to play shows promoted by Charles, musicians such as Otis Clay, Gene Chandler, The Kelly Brothers, and many others.

Chuck went to college at North Carolina Central University in Durham. He got married. And then his sophomore year Chuck got the news that Gerald had been killed in an accident. "You've heard the song the day the music died?" Chuck asks. "Well that was the day the music died for me."

And it did die - or at least go dormant. Years later while getting his Ph.D. in Tallahassee, Chuck met a guy who played in a gospel group. He invited Chuck to join in. Before long, Chuck became part of the Sensational Harmonaires and he was back in music. He also learned to play guitar around that time, which came in handy when he decided to join the North Carolina Jazz Ensemble. "I went to audition with my trumpet," Chuck says, "and there were about nine guys there with trumpets - all better than me. But they needed a guitar player. I wasn't that good at guitar at that point but I jumped in with both feet and ended up playing with the Jazz Ensemble for several years."

Meanwhile, Dr. Blues maintained an active life outside of music. He worked as a professor and a consultant. He worked on university campuses and in the private sector. He flew airplanes. He took up painting, mostly portraits with oil paints. He is currently a minister, too.

Chuck had moved to Charlotte to be close to one of his consulting clients, Duke Power, and decided to take a trip to Asheville to see the Fabulous Thunderbirds perform. He came back for some local festivals and moved to Asheville in 1997.

In 1999 he decided to form his own band so Chuck Beattie and Blues By Design was born. He finally gave up his spot in the Jazz Ensemble in 2000. "Three years of traveling back and forth between Asheville and Durham was enough for me," Chuck says. His band changed names to The Chuck Beattie Band in 2003, which is when Chuck took the stage in the United Kingdom.

Chuck says that there is veneration for American roots music, and especially the blues, that runs deep in the United Kingdom. "When I was there I was treated like a king," he says. Staying at a bed-and-breakfast near the festival venue, the couple who owned the inn threw a surprise party for him before he headed back to the United States.

In the years since, Chuck and his band have played at numerous venues and events in Western North Carolina. The band ranges from three to seven members depending on the gig. The three core members include Chuck on vocals, guitar, slide guitar, and harmonica; Jack Dillen (who acts as musical director) on guitar; and Kenny Dore on harmonica. If the venue is a bit bigger, the group adds Wayne Arcuri on bass and Kent Spillmann on drums. And for big shows the band adds Cliff Cotton on baritone sax and Bunny Clyde on alto sax, though Chuck says Bunny is a great artist in his own right and a multi-instrumentalist who can also play keyboards, guitar, drums, and bass. "The most usual configuration is the five-piece Chicago-style implemented by Muddy Waters," Chuck says.

Having played many of the area's venues and festivals, Chuck, at 60, is showing no signs of slowing down. He has made his primary living from music since 1999 and he wants to continue focusing on festivals and corporate and municipal functions. He loves the beauty and soul of Asheville but admits that the music scene is tough. The area has lots of great musicians and only a handful of venues that have regular live music and can pay a group like The Chuck Beattie Band.

With influences such as Taj Mahal, Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Son House, and Albert King, The Chuck Beattie Band offers a good time with music to keep you moving. And with any luck, Chuck will continue to be Dr. Blues for a long, long time.

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