

BLUES REVUE

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Little Toby Walker - Bayard Cutting Arboretum - Great River, New York Aug. 20

TOBY WALKER got his start playing for tips to afternoon bar patrons while hitchhiking his way cross-country. Entertaining to survive, he learned to charm and hold an audience, and today he's honed those skills to perfection. Several hundred fans brought chairs and blankets to the lawn at the Arboretum in Great River to hear his Piedmont picking, stories, and songs.

Sitting alone with a couple of guitars, Walker began with "100 Real Good Reasons To Sing the Blues" from his latest album, *Toby Walker Plays Well With Others*. This shaggy-dog story about the aftermath of a divorce showcased his humor and flair for the dramatic. Walker and his instrument were an entire band: He played bass, rhythm, and lead simultaneously, picking lightning-fast notes up and down the neck of his acoustic guitar. An instrumental he called "Blind Mans Bluff" combined the best licks of Blind Blake and Blind Lemon Jefferson. Here and on the audience-participation favorite "She Got Something There," on which he played dobro, he showed the enthusiastic crowd how a stringed instrument can imitate a trumpet or trombone, a human voice, or "the way girls walk when they have confidence."

Walker's dobro was also a suitable vehicle for "Where the Southern Cross the Dog," his take on what W.C. Handy might have heard on that hot Mississippi night a hundred years ago when he first identified the

blues. The eerie sound Walker conjured with his slide and wailing voice seemed to come from another time, and even



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children sat and stared at the stage, transfixed. He lightened the mood with hot fingerpicking, his hands so quick and sure that it was hard to tell how he was locating those cascading notes.

Picking up his acoustic guitar again, Walker played a beautiful "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," teasing out gorgeous chords. Children drifted lazily past the stage as a woman on a red blanket silently wept. Before the break, Walker paid homage to country and bluegrass greats Buddy Merriam and Ernie Sykes (both of whom played on his new record) with the upbeat "Looking at the World Through a Windshield," noting, "I've played this eight times a

week and never got sick of it."

Walker kicked off his second set with another humorous singalong, "Weak Willed and Easily Led," co-written by his frequent collaborator Martha Trachtenberg, and followed with "Beefsteak When I'm Hungry," a song he said he learned from James "Son" Thomas and recorded in Bob Margolin's living room. "Bob took out a 1930s acoustic Gibson guitar and put a bottleneck slide on it," Walker stated. His primer in blues styles ranged from the rocking "It's Tough" (about the '57 Chevy he'd like to own) to the more traditional "I'll Be So Glad When That Sun Goes Down" (which he sang to the accompaniment of a diddley bow balanced on his knee). Walker played "Baseball Blues" for fans of the Yankees and the Mets and dedicated Scott Joplin's "Kismet Rag" to a friend's cat who loved the tune and was listening to it when he died. Back on the dobro, he played a modernized "Frankie and Johnnie" in which Dr. Phil advised Frankie to "give it one more shot."

In case anyone still needed a chuckle, Walker ended with "Gimme That Online Religion," a lighthearted vision of attending church by computer. The cheering crowd demanded an encore ("Texas Tornado") and headed to the parking lot smiling, infused with the good humor of Walker's one-man band. — Kay Cordtz