

SCHOOLTEACHER BLUES

LITTLE TOBY WALKER HAS MADE A LIFE OUT OF THE BLUES—NOW HE'S BRINGING IT TO THE CLASSROOM

By Dave Gil de Rubio 01/25/2007

It's not even 9 in the morning, and reverberating through Ayelet Cohen's eighth grade social studies class is the kind of work song you'd expect to hear sung by sharecroppers in a cotton field. In the front of the class, two big-boned kids are pretending to use levers to elevate imaginary train tracks, as a stocky bearded man clad in a Hawaiian shirt and beret is maintaining a cadence with his singing.

The vocalist is Long Island bluesman Little Toby Walker, and this intriguing scenario is taking place at Rego Park's JHS 157 (aka the Stephen Halsey School) as a part of Carnegie Hall's American Roots Program. This four-part curriculum is called The Great American Migration in Blues Music, and it uses this distinctly home-grown genre to educate students about a segment of American history that's often glossed over.

Later classes will discuss how rural African-Americans made their way to urban areas, the evolution of blues into rock 'n' roll, and finally, students will end up writing their own blues songs about more familiar topics, like homework or broken iPods, which will then be sung by Walker. In the meantime, the 40-something musician turns out to be the perfect tour guide/teacher as this 50-minute class not only finds him playing harmonica and a National Steel guitar, but painting a vivid picture of hardships faced by African-Americans of the early 20th century, including references to segregation, Jim Crow laws and

lynchings.

Despite the early hour and how foreign blues music may sound to the ears of this ethnically diverse class, all 33 students are genuinely attentive. Credit Walker's humorous and easy-going teaching style, the subject matter of which not only includes the desperation caused by drought and boll-weevil infestation in Son House's chilling "Dry Spell Blues," but effectively draws parallels between the Great Mississippi River Flood of 1927 and the modern-day catastrophe of Hurricane Katrina. Even after the first period bell rings, all the students remain seated, allowing the bluesman to finish. Afterward, a duly impressed Mrs. Cohen is pleased with how well this first class went over.

"I could tell my students really like it, because when they're bored, my class is quick to talk," says Cohen. "But nobody said anything while Toby was speaking."

Following the class, at a nearby coffee shop, Walker is beaming and explaining the satisfaction he gets from donning an educator's cap.

"I like it when I'm told afterwards by a teacher that they were pleasantly shocked and surprised that normally difficult students were completely enraptured in what I was doing," he says with a grin. "To know that I'm doing something on a level that teachers can't do: using music to bring history to life. But I think the most important thing is exposing these kids in a very pleasant and entertaining way to a type of music they haven't heard before, which is blues."

And while the Brentwood native was a bright student, his time attending Sonderling High School in the early '70s found him dealing with teachers

who "didn't know what to do with me." Walker eventually found his career muse in an article about country blues guitarist Roy Bookbinder.

"I remember reading this story in a *Guitar Player* magazine about how Roy Bookbinder traveled in a camper and played all over the place and I thought, 'That's what I want to do,'" recalls the soft-spoken guitarist. A three-month cross-country hitchhiking jaunt inspired by heroes like Woody Guthrie and Jack Kerouac stoked the recent grad's musical wanderlust, as did latter-day stints visiting and studying at the feet of obscure blues masters like Etta Baker, R.L. Burnside and Othar Turner.

While music has been a constant in Walker's life, there was a 17-year stint working at the post office, which ended in 2004 when the decision was made to become a full-time musician. Up to that time, Walker had been playing locally at numerous Long Island bars, libraries and even in some schools on the advice of singer-songwriter Patricia Shih, who'd been playing the educational circuit in-between gigs.

"Patricia was instrumental in suggesting to me that I should go into the schools and play," explains Walker. "She told me that since I do a subject that no one else is doing, plus I work with an age group [junior high and high school-age kids] that hardly anyone touches, I would be a natural fit."

Walker's talents have not only landed him teaching gigs at Woody Mann's Acoustic Sessions and the National Guitar Workshop, but prompted The Blues Foundation to award him the 2002 International Blues Challenge Award, which included the title of "Best Unsigned Blues Artist." His reputation has earned him write-ups in a number of prestigious publications including *The New York Times*, *Downbeat* and the *London Sunday Times*, in addition to landing him invites onto bills with the likes of John Hammond, Taj Mahal and Richie Havens. With

such a robust resumé, perhaps it is no surprise that Walker made the decision to leave behind the stability of his civil-service job.

"Since I was 17 or 18 years old, I always considered myself a musician first," says Walker with a serene look of satisfaction. "To me, the post office was just a way for me to keep playing music. I look now at what I would be doing had I not left my job and I look at the things I've accomplished since and there really is no comparison."

In the two years since Walker made the leap, his talent, self-confidence and hard work have rewarded him with numerous opportunities. Along with entering his second year in the Carnegie program, Walker landed a booking agent and became a guest instructor at Jorma Kaukonen's Fur Peace Ranch alongside higher-profile musicians like David Bromberg, Kaukonen and Rory Block—all while squeezing in time to record and self-release albums including *Toby Walker Plays Well With Others*, featuring a guest appearance by famed Muddy Waters sideman "Steady Rollin'" Bob Margolin. The ability to play more prestigious gigs via the efforts of booking agent McShane Glover is allowing Walker to expand his territory as far north as Massachusetts and down the East Coast into Maryland, making for quite the packed schedule. But Walker wouldn't have it any other way.

"I travel around in my van and play all over the place," Walker says between sips of coffee. "[And while] you're always a little worried whether you're always going to be earning your money, that little bit of worry keeps you on your toes and will enable you to always earn the money. It's a bit of a paradox but it feels liberating."