

TRUE BLUES

MEL BROWN & THE HOMEWRECKERS

It's been exactly 13 years since Mel Brown transplanted the blues.

And when it comes to blues music, it's all about having roots. These days, however, while Brown isn't entirely out of his element, he's certainly chosen a harsher climate. In fact, he uprooted his blues back in 1989 and moved them to Kitchener, where he's lived ever since.

"I've been doing pretty well here," he drawls. "But if you're asking whether I think winters are bad — oh yeah, you better believe it."

Born in Mississippi in 1930, Brown has deep roots in the South. Figuring he started playing music at age 3 or 4, he used to have perfect pitch, though he's not trying to brag about it. Most of his relatives played an instrument and there was always a guitar, fiddle, or accordion lying around, he says. But despite these early musical memories, it's difficult for Brown to pinpoint when he learned the blues.

"Well, I heard it before I could play it," he explains slowly, speaking with a soft accent and never rushing his thoughts. "Really there was nuthin' for

me to learn, already knew it. It was all around me, y'know. I had a habit of hummin' everything, like bass lines and such."

At fourteen, Brown contracted meningitis. Being bed-ridden for several months, he began to study records of blues greats like B.B. King, Hank Williams and T-Bone Walker. Two years later, he left home and went to L.A. to check out the music scene. For the next few years, he played in studio sessions and toured the clubs.

It may sound like a bunch of random performances and recordings, but that's exactly what makes Brown's status as a musician so legendary.

"I try to keep it balanced. Not too high up or low down. An' I've played from the poor house to the big house," he says.

His experience reads like an all-star resume. He's played in house bands for Steve Allen, Bill Cosby and Doris Day. He's worked with Willie Nelson and other elites like Johnny Otis, Jerry Lewis, Sonny Boy Williamson, Etta James, Buddy Guy, Lightnin' Hopkins, John Lee Hooker, B.B. King, Bobby Darin, Nancy Wilson, Bobby "Blue" Bland and Andy Williams.

Along with this extensive list of famous friends, his reputation as a guitar player has earned him rave reviews

and awards as well. His last solo album, *Neck Bones and Caviar*, won the W.C. Handy award (the equivalent to a Grammy in the blues world) for the

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best blues comeback album. The live album he did with Snooky Pryor, called *Double Shot!*, won a big prize in France last year and was also nominated for a Juno Award.

"I just call it a job," Brown says modestly, when confronted with the question of how he views his accomplishments. "I don't know about all this success people write about... I'm just lookin' for some peace of mind, y'know. Sometimes that's hard enough."

After many years of drifting and playing various clubs around the States, it was finally time for Brown to settle down and re-establish his roots.

Only this time, he took to Canadian soil. The folks at the Pop the Gator club in Kitchener booked Brown for a gig four days before Christmas in 1989. The rest, as they say, is history.

"Bein' on the road is habit-forming," Brown explains. "It was hard when I came off the road; it was very addictive. But I enjoy comin' home and getting back in my bed..."

"It's nice to be in one little area now. The ol' life seems glamorous, but I traded it in. I deal with people rather than a mass audience and a paycheque. It's more intimate-like."

Suburban Ontario seems a far cry from the world Brown knew growing up. As a kid, though, he remembers dreaming of coming to Canada to play his music.

"I always wanted to come here. Montreal was one of the places I wanted to go 'cause it was all French and different. I used to read a lot, so I knew it was out there. Y'know, I'd play with my eyes closed and see all these places," he recalls.

So at about age 50, Brown took himself, the blues, and his dreams and transplanted these roots. He plays every week at the same club in Kitchener with his band, The Homewreckers. He's still making records with the Toronto-based blues and roots label, Electro-Fi Records. He

even manages to tour a little, making stops each year in Ottawa for Bluesfest, and visiting the folks back home in Mississippi when he gets the chance.

And although the blues are a style with roots deeply embedded in a particular time and place, Brown believes tapping into it comes from pure intuition, no matter where he's playing. For him, the feelings and emotions that give the blues their signature style still run deep.

"I just love playin'. Everybody is into it, too, if you're playing it right. Mostly all guitar players, when they start, go into a trance. Even little kids, their faces all twisted..."

I think it's the notes you play. And yeah, I make expressions. Damn, I can get real ugly sometimes."

Yet with the last thirteen years of security and stability behind him, Brown says his life is far from dull. After all, the blues are a type of music, not a lifestyle.

"I don't know how to retire. If I was a construction worker or something, I'd have somethin' to retire for. But what do I do? I play a little guitar and I play a little golf, so that's what I'd be doin' anyway, I guess," Brown says, chuckling to himself.

[BY KATYA DIAKOW]