



BARRY OWENS

Blues singer and guitarist Lewis Cowdrey tunes up his Stratocaster. The critically acclaimed musician will perform this month during the Blues Crawl in Old Town.

THE BLUES SINGER

Crown Heights mechanic (and Texas blues figure) to headline Blues Crawl

BY JOE STUMPE

Lewis Cowdrey straps on a beat-up acoustic guitar and grins.

"Here's another reason I like Wichita," Cowdrey says before launching into an old blues number. "I got this at a garage sale for not quite \$5. It doesn't play great, but neither do I."

Many would beg to differ. Cowdrey, who will headline the Sept. 27 Fall Blues Crawl Afterparty in Old Town, was one of the founders of the famed Austin, Texas blues scene that produced Stevie Ray Vaughn, the Fabulous Thunderbirds and more. Accounts of that fertile period in music history routinely reference Cowdrey alongside both Stevie and Jimmy Vaughn, W.C. Clark, Lou Ann Barton and others who went on to greater popularity.

Today, Cowdrey lives in Crown Heights with his wife, Karin, who works for Spirit (and who plays in the Boeing jazz band). He works on old Volkswagens to help make ends meet (his personal collection includes two Buggies, a Fastback and VW bus). He thinks he played about four gigs last year for a total of \$125.

"That's not a profession, that's a

hobby," Cowdrey says.

Wichita Blues Society president Patti Parker calls him "a hidden treasure in Wichita."

What happened?

Hell if Cowdrey knows.

One decade he's touring Europe on the heels of a CD that's drawing rave reviews and the next he's...not.

Not that Cowdrey is complaining. He's mostly always considered it a privilege to play for an audience.

"I got to be something without being anything," he said. "I got to be the blues singer."

BORN BEATNIK

Full-time occupation or not, the 63-year-old Cowdrey still looks like a musician with his earring and gray stubble. He's a story-teller, though not in the linear sense of first this happened, then this happened. Instead, a story about riding the Greyhound bus will veer into an account of a female murderess he met on one trip and then swerve into an aside on the similar tales that make up the best blues songs. But here's the linear part of his story:

Cowdrey grew up in the west Texas town of Lubbock. Buddy Holly

had put Lubbock on the map musically ("I'd say Buddy Holly was the most important white guy since Bob Wills," Cowdrey says), but the bespectacled rocker had plenty of company: Waylon Jennings was a disc jockey on the local radio station, session sax legend Bobby Keys was in the high school band at the same times as Cowdrey, and future Austin fixtures Joe Ely and Jimmy Gillmore were also around.

"There were musicians everywhere, and everything was changing," Cowdrey said.

Cowdrey took his first piano lesson at six, got his first harmonica at the age of eight and a saxophone a few years later. He thinks his father would have made a great musician, but he was tied to a job with the railroad, the family trade. Cowdrey saw a different future for himself.

"When I was nine or 10, I was pretty sure I was a beatnik," he said. He joined a band at 18 and never looked back, although his chosen profession would rarely pay the bills on its own over the decades to come. He raced motorcycles and attended college, but music usually came first, especially jazz and blues.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

BLUES CRAWL IN OLD TOWN

The Wichita Blues Society will hold its Fall Blues Crawl in Old Town on Sept. 27, 6-9 p.m. with an after-party at America's Pub from 9 p.m. to midnight. Here's a look at the locations and the lineup.

MORT'S Jimmie Lewin and the Kingtones

LOFT 150 Jenny Detra and Good Cookin'

LARKSPUR Craig Steward

HEROE'S Wing Tip Six

BRICKYARD PorterHouse

FINN'S Bloodline Posse

AMERICA'S PUB Little Smoke (plus afterparty at 9pm with Lewis Cowdrey)

SUEDE Prerequisite

CLUB INDIGO The Nine

ROCK ISLAND Rachelle Coba

BACKYARD BLUES MAN

CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

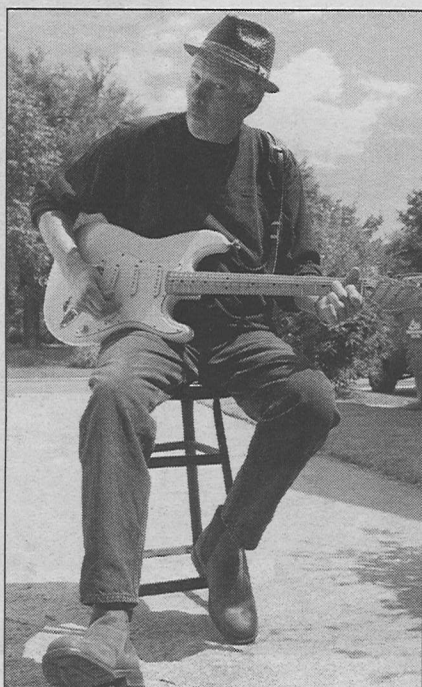
AUSTIN CALLING

Cowdrey moved to Austin in the 1970s and played in various bands, including Lewis and the Legends, Sunnyland, the Fabulous Rockets (started with Angela Strehil) and the Storm (started with Jimmy Vaughn). "That (the Storm) was me and everybody who became famous in Austin," Cowdrey said.

Like other members of the Texas capitol's blues scene, he hung out at Antone's and jammed with the established African-American bluesmen who came through town to perform there. Eventually he got to play with just about everybody he idolized—Jimmy Reed, Albert Collins, Lightning Hopkins and Otis Rush.

Cowdrey hosted an open mic night at Antone's. He toured Europe and Israel. In 1994 he released a CD, "It's Lewis," on Antone's label, backed by players like Clark and drummer Freddy "Pharoah" Walden. Wrote one reviewer: "Quite simply, 'It's Lewis' is, we feel, the best Texas Blues CD of the last 20 years."

The CD sold about 10,000 copies worldwide, but Cowdrey said he never made any money off of it. And the gigs—at least those worth



playing—dried up.

By the time he moved to Kansas in the 1990s, Cowdrey said, "I thought I would never play again."

But of course he did, and still does occasionally. In Wichita he's performed with Barry Harris, Jesse Anderson, George Graybill, Tim Johnson, Cliff and Jessie Major, David Graham and others.

"I know a lot of famous guys just a little bit," Cowdrey said. "The unfamous guys are just as impressive, which is why I like Wichita."

PUB SHOW

Cowdrey plays guitar and harmonica, sings and writes songs. Above all he considers himself an entertainer, someone who can gear his show to the crowd whether they want covers of other people's famous songs or his own originals. Performers who moonlight as prima donnas are "ludicrous," he said. "I'm like, hey dude, the show must go on."

For his Afterparty show at America's Pub, "I intend to do a bunch of songs that mean a lot to me, and I intend to respond to people's requests."

He plans a folky acoustic set, another focused on the harp and a third featuring perhaps his best weapon—a voice just high and piercing enough to cut through any Texas roadhouse. After all these years of playing, he doesn't mind admitting that he's still excited by the opportunity.

"Every time you pick up a guitar there's a certain level you want to reach—and not get run out of town on a rail."

Playing the blues has been a lot of things to Cowdrey—a dream, a job, a hobby. "But mostly it's something I wouldn't want to do without," he said.

Free Concert

Park City Smoke in the Air
State Championship BBQ
and the
Wichita Blues Society
present

BBQ & Blues

Fri., Sept. 11
5:30 - 10 p.m.

Weideman Park
(next to Kansas Coliseum)

Enjoy ribs from
championship contenders
for a \$1 each with a side of
the *Blues* for free!

Bring your coolers and lawn
chairs but no alcohol

Main Stage: Made From
Scratch, Little Smoke and
Sharon Rush Band

Solo/Duos in the park:
Craig Steward, Jenny Detra
and Tom Szambecki, Front
Porch Blues

Wichita Blues Society events:
Fall Blues Crawl -
Sept. 27 in Old Town
Blues in Schools Fundraiser -
Oct. 25

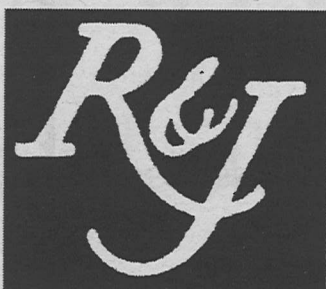
www.wichitablues.org



Ask anyone, it is our dedicated staff that makes the difference.

See our new web site for
party ideas, serving guides,
special deals and more.

rjdiscountliquor.com



DISCOUNT LIQUOR

- HUGE WINE SELECTION
- PARTY PLANNING & GIFT IDEAS
- ASK ABOUT OUR GIFT CARDS

3015 E. DOUGLAS
(next to Harry's Uptown Bar & Grill)

681-3761