

Marion County guitarist has performed 160 times in 12 states

By Casey Phillips

Tuesday, November 27, 2012

"The Sound of Music" teaches that the beginning is a fine place to start for any budding musician. Jesse Black's problem was figuring out what came next.

About six months after he picked up the guitar at age 10, Jesse made his stage debut during an open jam at the Lakeside Officer's Club on Arnold Air Force Base in Tullahoma, Tenn. At the time, his repertoire consisted entirely of intros to classic rock standards, but his rendition of the signature guitar lick leading into Guns 'n Roses' "Sweet Child of Mine" received a rousing response from the packed club.

Later, he joined the house band for a cover of Deep Purple's "Smoke on the Water." He only knew the song's legendary opening notes, but by the first verse, he learned a crucial performing truth: When in doubt, just fake it.

"I learned from a very young age that there's a volume switch on a guitar," Jesse, now 14, laughed. "You just turn it off and strum, and it looks like you're playing. People are like, 'Wow, that kid knows exactly what he's doing.'"

Eventually, Jesse began adding full songs to his repertoire through a combination of YouTube video tutorials and lessons from Jerry Don Haynes, an instructor at New Millennium Music near his home in Jasper, Tenn.

Since then, his musical interests have windmilled through the catalogs of artists such as The Eagles and The Beatles, whose members' faces adorn his guitar strap. About 18 months ago, however, he discovered the blues and quickly fell in love with how open the music was to different interpretations.

"Every time [I heard the blues], they never played it the same," he said. "You can take any blues song ... and play it slower or faster or with a little more rhythm and make it the way you want it to sound.

"It's not like there's one stuck way to play a song. It's freeing; you can do what you want with it."

That interest has been further fueled by Jesse's participation in a Sunday night jam at Whabah Steak House in Bowling Green, Ky., where he met his blues mentor, pianist Kenny Lee Smith.

Smith is the president of the Kentucky Blues Society and a veteran musician with 40 years on stage. When Jesse and his father, Mike Black, showed up one Sunday, Smith said he knew the preteen was special. Earlier this year, he signed Jesse up as a member of the society.

"I think Jesse is going to go along and be one of the great musicians in the music industry, if he keeps developing like he has," Smith said. "We're excited to see such a young person be so advanced."

From the 20-second snippets he started with, Jesse has since built up a repertoire of 150 minutes of blues, rock and country covers and originals. He has performed on stages in 12 states as far away as Letcher, S.D., and Montrose, Colo.

A live recording of one of Jesse's original songs, "Next Pass," was used in an episode of "Skull Bound TV," a show on the Sportsman Channel.

In April, Jesse established a monthly open mike in South Pittsburg for underage artists who aren't able to travel out of state for the opportunity to play.

About six months ago, he joined a second blues society in Nashville and earlier this month competed for the chance to represent the society as the youth delegate to the International Blues Challenge in Memphis next January. He finished second, earning the right to perform as part of a showcase at B.B. King's in Memphis in late January.

Despite his self-described immunity to stage fright, Jesse said he recognizes that performing in the seat of the blues is a big deal.

"I'm kind of glad I lost," he said, laughing. "I mean, B.B. King's? That's kind of a big deal."

Smith said Jesse's fearlessness as a performer has helped him accelerate faster than many young musicians and should stand him in good stead as his career progresses.

"You can put Jesse on stage with anybody with a mike and a guitar, and he's ready to go," Smith said.



ABOUT HIM

- School: Ninth-grader at Marion County High School.
- Siblings: Sister, Chelsea, 24.
- Favorite song to play: "Pride and Joy" by Stevie Ray Vaughan.
- Musical idol(s): Don Henley (vocals) and Jimmy Page (guitar).
- Favorite movie: "The Blues Brothers."

CLAIM TO FAME

Guitarist Jesse Black, 14, has performed 160 times in seven states over the past four years. He is a member of the Nashville and Kentucky blues societies and will perform as part of a blues showcase at B.B. King's in Memphis.

TALENT SHOW

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