

Local teen enter International Blues Challenge

Local teen, Jesse Black, has certainly made a name for himself in the music industry, and at a very young age. Black started singing at the age of 10, and by the age of 14, he began hosting Music on Cedar, Open Mic Night, which he created as a 4-H project at the time. The event, which takes place on the first Tuesday of each month in South Pittsburg every year from April through October, has been going for the last four years.

Black is now entered to compete in the International Blues Challenge (IBC), set for January 28 through 30 on Beale Street in Memphis. This competition is an international one, sure to have some rising great blues singers performing, and Black certainly fits that bill. He has already won the Blues Challenge for the Kentucky Blues Society, where he competed in the adult category. "At 17 years old, he is one of the few youth performers to enter as an adult in the thirty-plus years of the IBCs," said proud dad, Mike Black.

This won't be Black's first year at the IBCs. Black has attended the last three years and "represented the Nashville Blues Society in a showcase youth event at B. B. Kings in 2013 and 2014," said his dad.

When asked why he chose the adult category instead of youth this year, Jesse explained, "The youth isn't divided into solo, duo and band. I would enter solo and a band beat me every time. I figured 'go big or go home', so I entered as an adult. I have confidence in myself."

As far as preparing for such a big competition, Jesse said he plays through his set to get his timing down, but the biggest part is that he gets in the shower listening to Robert Johnson and spends the night-time listening to Stevie Ray Vaughan, or the like. "You've got to feel it rather than memorize it. It's that way with blues, jazz, and soul. You do it and don't think about it."

Black began singing publically by the time he was 11 years old. His dad took him to where he worked at the Arnold Air Force base in Tullahoma to perform on Friday nights with a band. Black said, "I brought my guitar, which was twice as tall as I was. The band members were old to me then, in their thirties, and they were very intimidating. I told them I could play the intro to some songs but couldn't play a whole song." The band let Black do his thing, then had him play the intros that he knew with them to songs they sang. Black said he had never been up in front of people but stated, "I have that type of personality. I like to talk to people."

To be such a young performer, Black has been to more than 180 venues in 17 states and has performed more than 440 times, including 130 performances just in 2015. Some well-known and famous venues include B. B. Kings in Memphis, the Hard Rock Cafe in both Nashville and Memphis, and Ground Zero in Clarksdale, Mississippi. He has performed locally at the National Cornbread Festival, Stevarinos, and the Smokehouse Lodge in Monteagle. Black doesn't let his musical talents get the best of

him. He is down to earth, personable, and often available for local charities and events, such as the Marion County Chamber of Commerce's annual banquet.

When asked what it must be like to perform in venues he is too young to otherwise go into Black stated, "It's not as bad now as when I was 14. It was kind of weird, but I got used to it." He gestured that he got weird looks from the adults in these places. "People forget about my age when I start to play," said Black. He added that was something he liked about competing in Memphis. "There are a lot of youth there. I'm not the only one." He mentioned one six year old that could outplay him on the guitar.

Black and his parents worked on his performances and schedule for as long as they could. The schedule got busy enough that Black had to get a booking agent at the end of 2014, Dea Meeks with Deava Music Management.

Black is currently a senior at Marion County High School. He plans on attending college in Cookeville at Tennessee Technological University, where he will be majoring in mechanical engineering.

Black is a two-time graduate of the famous Pinetop Perkins Blues Workshop, which is held annually in Clarksdale, Mississippi, and plans on going back for his third year this June. His instructor there was Bob Margolin, who was the guitar player for Muddy Waters for many years. Black is also a member of five blues societies, which include Kentucky, Nashville, Smokey Mountain, Kansas City and Dayton.

Black said when he went to Pinetop Perkins Blues Workshop he met up with kids from all over. "The closest one to this area was five or six hours away in Virginia." Now when Black goes to blues competitions he said "it's like a family reunion." He keeps up with fellow blues performers his age by way of text and twitter and enjoys his reunions.

For those that have seen Black perform, you know it's not just about the blues. Black sings classic rock, country, folk, and bluegrass. He is adept at multiple instruments including a six and 12 string acoustic, electric, bass, mandolin, banjo, harmonica, and drums. He is also proficient on keyboards and the fiddle, but has not yet performed with these instruments, but that may just be a matter of time.

Melissa Brown, Publisher Marion County Newspapers

Pics: Jesse, Jesse1, Jesse2