



Daily Nebraskan Photo

Jimmy Johnson and his Chicago Blues Band appeared at the Zoo Bar last Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights.

Blues-playing guitar man started career on piano

By Mary Kay Wayman

"Blues is not goin' to school. If you don't feel it you can't play it," the singer said as he smoked another small cigar. Jimmy Johnson and his Chicago Blues Band was tuning up this weekend for the first of three days at the Zoo Bar.

"Sometimes you feel bad, sometimes you feel good. Everybody plays the blues a different way," Johnson said.

Johnson's brand of blues includes falsetto vocal work and fluid guitar playing.

Twenty years of musical experience are the dues Johnson paid to play the blues. He discovered his musical talent as a young boy, but didn't have a guitar.

"I always wanted a guitar, but couldn't afford it," he said. Instead, Johnson learned his first music on his high school piano.

After high school, Johnson went to Chicago to become professionally involved in music. In Chicago, he bought his first guitar and enrolled in music school.

"They taught me how to count, how to read (music). But they was teaching me to play 'Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star,'" he said, shaking his head. "After I learned the fundamentals of guitar I went on my own."

For most of his career Johnson was not completely on his own, but part of other groups. His first job was with the Jimmy Dawkins band.

Johnson said he hasn't always played the blues. His early style was soul music. "I played some blues, but very little," he said. His transition to blues came in

1975. He has been the "front man," the headliner of his own band, for about three years.

The change has had advantages for Johnson, he said.

"If you want to play music you always love it. But if you're the front man you get a chance to do exactly what you want to do," he said.

To do what he wants, Johnson is on the road all but one day a month or one week a year, he said. If working on the road is difficult, Johnson said it's because he pushes himself.

"You burn up a lot of energy," he said. "The reason is you got to push. You don't want to stay here. You want to do this, right?" He gestured, raising his hand as he spoke.

"I'm determined not to fall. I got to go up," he said.


But Johnson said his incentive is something less tangible than money. "I'm not worried about getting rich. My worries are staying healthy and peace of mind," he said.

"I've already got peace of mind. What would I have now that I wouldn't have if I was rich?" he asked.

Johnson said he doesn't want to be famous either. "Instead, I play to make people happy. It gasses me to make people happy," he said. "If I play for people and don't make them happy, then it's a drag for me."

The band finished tuning up and Johnson excused himself to play for a crowd that he said expects "100 percent blues."

"I love playing here," he said. "This is for real."



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