

Blues band fills 'roomful'

By ANN STACK
Senior Reporter

Roomful of Blues has become more like a world party of blues.

Together in one form or another for the past 29 years, Roomful of Blues has so many veterans it has to have reunions every five years just to keep up on everyone, lead singer "Sugar" Ray Norcia said.

Norcia, formerly with Sugar Ray and the Bluetones, is the rookie of the band, having only been with Roomful for six years. Out of the nine-member band, there are a few who have been with the band for the duration, including drummer John Rossi, alto and tenor saxophonist Rich Lataille and baritone saxophonist Doug James.

And after nearly three decades of blues done its way, Roomful of Blues is finally coming into its own as a band. Roomful was named 1996's Blues Band of the Year in "Down Beat" magazine's 44th annual Critic's Poll. Its album, "Turn It On! Turn It Up!," was a Grammy nominee for Blues Album of the Year.

"We lost to John Lee Hooker, so we weren't too disappointed," Norcia said.

The band also is nominated for two W.C. Handy awards — for best blues band and best horn section. (The awards are presented May 1.) Its brand-spankin'-new release, "Under One Roof," has garnered a spot in the College Music Journal's charts. The band even managed to sneak on to AAA-radio format.

"We've always complained in the past that we haven't gotten radio play," Norcia said.

But this isn't a band to sit back and enjoy its newfound popularity — the members do about 250 shows a year. They're out touring now to support their new album, and they will stop in Lincoln tonight at the Zoo Bar, 136 N. 14th St.

The band has just finished recording a Christmas album and already is throwing around ideas for another album to be released in 1998. As for the attention that Roomful is getting lately, Norcia is honored.

"It feels good to be picked out from among our peers," he said. "The band's been working really hard through the years, and it's nice to be recognized for that."

With nine members, they really do create a roomful of blues. The horn section gives them a Kansas City swing band feel, and they combine that with — among other influences — a Chicago blues style to create their unique sound.

"We're something to look at," he said. "We play so many different styles; we cover all the bases. We have a lot of fun, too."

And they're out to convert first-time blues listeners as well.

"It's fun to educate people," he said. "Some people come with friends, and they have a preconceived idea of what the blues are. They think it's sad music, and it's not at all like that. They leave converted."

Tonight's 21-and-over show starts around 9 and has a \$10 cover charge.

UNL jazz group will take its act to Carnegie Hall

By LIZA HOLTMEIER
Staff Reporter

Following in the footsteps of Benny Goodman, Ella Fitzgerald and Dizzy Gillespie, the UNL Vocal Jazz Ensemble will perform at Carnegie Hall in the "North American Vocal Jazz Extravaganza."

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln ensemble was invited to participate in the Extravaganza in New York City on June 2 upon the recommendation of jazz educator Phil Mattson of Iowa.

The event consists of an intensive four-day rehearsal and workshop period in which the ensemble will work with groups from places ranging from California to Massachusetts. The event culminates in a solo performance and a combined finale conducted by Mattson at Carnegie Hall.

"Phil Mattson is probably the top vocal jazz educator, and his group is one of the best," said ensemble director Sheryl Monkliken. "I think

the students will really see what it takes to be a good group."

Founded in 1994 by Monkliken, the ensemble consists of eight vocalists and three rhythm section members who are currently enrolled in UNL's Vocal Jazz Ensemble class.

Monkliken is especially excited about the opportunity because the group is fairly new.

"This is the first year it's offered as a course," Monkliken said. "The last two years it was just volunteer, whenever anybody would show up. This is the first year that they had auditions, and the group is still not very well known."

Though young, the ensemble has also performed with the UNL Jazz Ensemble and has worked with jazz performer Kahil El'Zabar.

While in New York, the ensemble will perform one piece from its last concert, as well as two new pieces the members must learn for the mass-choir finale.

"We'll just learn the notes before we go, and then we'll work on them in New York," Monkliken said.

The ensemble also hopes to have some free time during its four-day visit.

"Hopefully we'll catch a Broadway musical or maybe find some good jazz to listen to," Monkliken said.

Prior to its trip to New York, the ensemble will tour high schools throughout Nebraska and lead workshops in Seward, Grand Island, Fremont, Hastings and Columbus, among others.

"So many high school students out there aren't exposed to jazz," vocalist Mandy Coleman said. "I really want to teach and show them what is available."

"Phil Mattson is probably the top vocal jazz educator, and his group is one of the best. I think the students will really see what it takes to be a good group."

SHERYL MONKLIKEN
ensemble director



ROOMFUL OF BLUES will play tonight at the Zoo Bar, 136 N. 14th St.

New Videos

New releases escaped most viewers

By GERRY BELTZ
Film Critic

Yikes! It's an attack of the "blink-and-you-missed-'em" movies on the New Release shelves. Seriously, most of these films played for just a couple of weeks, if they made it to Lincoln at all. Keeping with that theme, the pick-of-the-week never played here either.

"Dear God" — After the successful "Sabrina," "Talk Soup" alum Greg Kinnear was riding a wave of success. And then he hit the rocky shoals of the lameoid comedy "Dear God."

A small-time con man (Kinnear) is sentenced to one year of working in the dead-letter office of the post office, dealing with letters written to Elvis, Santa, financial aid and God.

He starts replying to them, and the (supposed) laughter starts from there.

"Rich Man's Wife" — Oh, dear. It's a story of a woman wrongly suspected of killing her husband, utilizing a script apparently written by baboons with laptops, lobotomies and way too much time on their hands.

Wife A (Halle Berry) is in a bad marriage with Husband A (Christopher MacDonald), who suddenly turns up dead. Did she do it? Is she guilty? Did you remember to turn off the iron? Check the iron. Skip the movie.

"To Gillian On Her 37th Birthday" — Based on the play of the same name, the movie doesn't do the story justice.

Dave (Peter Gallagher) is still in love with Gillian (Michelle Pfeiffer), despite the fact that she has been dead

for two years. While he walks around with her "ghost," he is overlooking the current problems within his own family.

Nothing too great here.

PICK-OF-THE-WEEK — It looks like a rip-off of "The Big Chill," but "Peter's Friends" has much more class and style.

It's also got Ken (Branagh) and Emma (Thompson), along with comedienne Rita Rudner and (as with any Branagh film) Richard Briers and Phyllida Law.

Peter (Stephen Fry) inherits a large estate from his father, and he invites his old group of friends from Cambridge University to come out and celebrate the weekend and see how everyone has changed over the last decade.

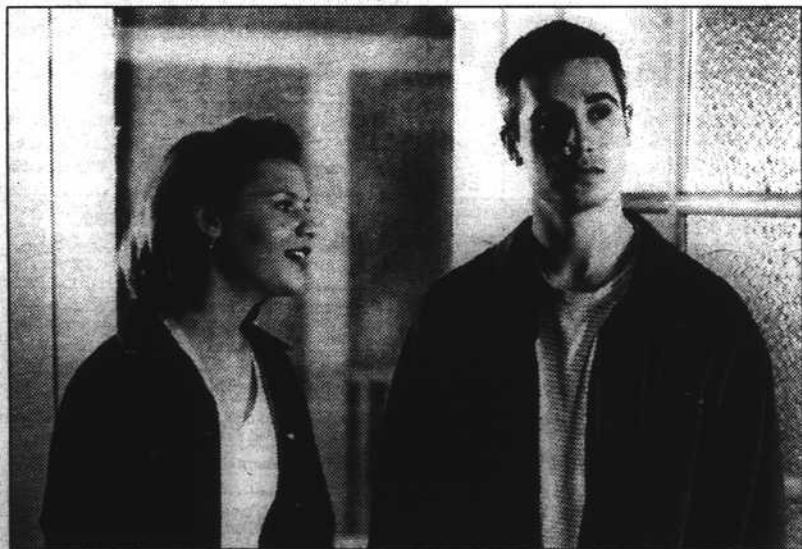


PHOTO COURTESY OF COLUMBIA PICTURES INDUSTRIES, INC. CLAIRE DANES and Freddie Prinze Jr. play supporting roles in the romantic drama "To Gillian on Her 37th Birthday." The film, which is based on the play of the same name, makes its debut on video store shelves today.