

Blairing Urban Folk

A transplant from New Jersey adopts Detroit and belts out message music and poetry.

Perhaps it seems a bit cliché to call David Blair a renaissance man. But the New Jersey-born, Detroit-based poet, singer, songwriter, playwright, actor and musician does a little bit of everything, and does it all very well.

Upcoming performance:

Blair and the Boyfriends

Jan. 10

Goldfish Tea

117 W. Fourth St., Royal Oak

7 p.m.

Free

248-541-5252

GoldfishTea.com

SeriousArtists.co/blair.html

MySpace.com/

BlairAndTheBoyfriends

Once again David Blair is on the move. At the moment, the singer/songwriter/poet is in the middle of another national tour with his band, Blair and the Boyfriends, promoting his sixth album, "The Line," on indie label Repeatable Silence Records.

This new album is a slight departure for Blair, best known as Detroit's foremost proponent of urban folk music. Accolades like his 2007 Detroit Music Award for Outstanding Acoustic Artist, a Best Folk Artist award from *Real Detroit Weekly*, and a Best Urban Folk Poet nod from *Metro Times* are among the many examples of recognition he has received.

On "The Line," Blair's classically trained baritone is as husky and smooth as ever, his plaintive melodies delivering stark, thought-provoking lyrics. But this music is more aggressive and rocking, with electric guitars augmenting the driving acoustic rhythms and propulsive drums.

"I wanted to do something different," Blair explains. "Also, a lot of the songs on the new album are about war. Chuck D from Public Enemy says, 'When you're trying to wake people up, you make noise.' I think that sentiment is probably partly responsible for the electric guitars and louder drums."

Still the sound is rooted in acoustic music. In the Boyfriends' live show, Ken Comstock's acoustic bass and Chris Winter's drums anchor Blair's ever-present acoustic guitar playing.

Blair wondered for a while if he wanted to refer to himself as a folk singer. "[My music] is



Photo by Dave Lewinski

not about fields and trees as much as it's about pavement and concrete," he says. "But Nina Simone thought of herself as a folk singer, so folk is a really broad description." The folk mantle allows Blair to draw from everything, to be inspired by and continuously tell compelling stories of the world around him.

As a storytelling vehicle, Blair's poetry is as celebrated as his music. The National Poetry Slam Champion has appeared on HBO's "Def Poetry Jam," and the band's current tour finds them playing at poetry venues about half the time, music venues the other half.

"I don't particularly decide whether something is going to be music or a poem," he reveals when describing his writing process. "Because I'm interested in both, I have a little bit of a luxury to leave myself open to the muse, however it comes."

Thankfully, the muse comes in many different ways. In 2006, it inspired a very personal one-man show called "Burying the Evidence," which combined poetry, music, comedy and acting. The play centered on truths that we hide from strangers, friends, family and even ourselves.

In December 2009, Blair

released "Moonwalking" on Penmanship Books, a book and CD of poetry inspired by Michael Jackson. Blair remembers, "Though I was younger than him, at a lot of points in my young life, I wanted to be like him—I wanted to be a singer, a musician, a performer—and I just thought his life was fascinating, as most of the world did.

"I also think that to write about Michael

Jackson leaves an opening to [address] race, gender identity, youth, old age, poverty, superstardom, what it means to be American, what it means to be a Black American," Blair continues. "So in some ways writing about Michael Jackson's life [provided] a vehicle for me to talk about all of those things with a cohesive idea holding it all together."

Another big influence for Blair is his adopted hometown, Detroit. His poem, "Detroit (While I Was Away)" is a cascade of imagery like the city itself. "My heart beats like tool and die for you/Like horsepower and pistons for you," he confesses, like a suitor pining for an old lover.

"I love Detroit. The city is going through a little rougher patch right now than usual, but the thought of abandoning all of that history in the face of a rough spot is ridiculous," he says. "We have to keep our eyes on the prize and remember that we have a lot to harvest. Detroit has always been about the creative inspiration of the people, and I see nothing changing that for the future." **B**

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