

Messenger of song and feeling

Blues artist Tony Mason draws audience into a vivid and colorful world

By M. Elwell Romancito

We lose a few and win a few when it comes to the musical talent pool over the year. Players drift in and out on the winds that blow to Austin, New York and L.A. But every once in a while, that drifter's wind blows a player our way and Taos is richer for it.

That is the case of Tony Mason, who comes to Taos by way of New England coffee houses and clubs. He moved here with his wife, Teddy, with other family members nearby. They worked during the summer on the little house they bought just before the Cañón foothills.

"Before we bought that house, we took our time," Mason told the audience as he sang and played both acoustic and electric guitars on the night before New Year's Eve at Black Mesa Winery - Taos Tasting Room, 241 Ledoux St. "Then when I noticed the sun was shining in the back door of the house, I thought, 'This house is going to be just fine.'" Then he started to play a blues song that echoes those sentiments exactly with phrases like, "Sun's gonna shine in my back door someday. The wind's gonna rise and blow my blues away."

That phrase may be in a dozen or more classic blues songs, but until you've heard Mason sing it, maybe you didn't understand it the way you do now. Such is the charm of this one-man band.

A singer and songwriter, he played his way through New York City basket houses (venues where unpaid performers would pass around a basket at the end of each set and hope to make some money). He also toured New England clubs and schools as well as the college coffee house circuit.

You'd be wrong if you dismissed him as simply a singer-songwriter. His understated flash and ability as a player might even surpass his skills as an entertainer and storyteller. He's developed arrangements for many of his songs, giving him the satisfaction of learning how to arrange music. These arrangements add a variety of different styles and new material to his performance.

When asked how a song might end up on his list, he said there are many things that come into play.

"It's not something that I have a set way of doing. Sometimes it's what it sounds like or sometimes it's something in the lyric that catches me. Sometimes it's ... I don't know what it is. It just grabs me," he said during a break.

There are many songs on his list that he may not have played for a while because he wants to get them just right. "I'm still working on many of these tunes. There's one I'm working on ... a jazz tune. I'm having a hard getting the chords to flow smoothly.



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Musician Tony Mason

It's an old Ink Spots tune called 'It's a Sin to Tell a Lie.' I got into doing some standards. I hear songs that I need to hear a few more times because I figure it might be something I can do something with," he said.

His song selections veer wildly from genre to genre and feeling to feeling. One song will be a cover of an early, melancholy folk song by Joan Baez and the next, he's rendering a road-song classic by Taj Mahal with all its wit and blues craft.

Greenwich Village, New York, is where Mason began his musical history, and he's shared the stage with other up-and-coming musicians who were part of the 1960s folk revival. He confessed that he'd recently updated his website and decided to cut much of what he called "the name dropping" because it didn't seem to mean that much to him or anybody else.

Even though he's skipped the name dropping, you can feel it in the songs he's sung and written. There's an aspect of Mason that might remind us older folk scholars of Shel Silverstein, an American poet, singer-songwriter, cartoonist, screenwriter and author of children's books.

During his Greenwich Village days, Mason was part of a band called the Mojo Four. That was the opening act for many well-known performers at the Night Owl Cafe in "the Village." Mason also played with the band Children of God at venues in the Village and around New York City. He has worked in radio, television and live performances with many

local musicians and celebrities in and around New York City.

When asked about his ideal music gig, surprisingly, his answer was about playing music with others instead of polishing his solo performance. "I was involved with a group of people before I left Vermont. They were all superlative musicians. Every time we played together, it was fresh. They were all at a point where money wasn't the main reason they were playing. Ego was not something that came into play," he said.

At this point, though, he says he is honing his show and learning what he can from the people who live here. It's all new to him. The brand and flavor of country music that is popular here is an entirely novel experience to him. "The whole two-step music scene is so different than the country music scene is on the East Coast," he said.

Over the years, Mason has transitioned from folk music to blues, from acoustic guitar to rhythm and blues, from a singular troubadour to band member and back again. As an entertainer, he flows from focused performer to whimsical storyteller. There are pauses in between his songs when he brings the listener up to speed about what a song means to how the song makes him feel.

When we eventually hear the song, we might laugh or we might cry. It's all in the hands of this messenger of song and feeling. He has a bag of tricks filled with hundreds of songs and stories, and he's eager to share them all.