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Country Blues a la Bill McQuaid

After making some waves at the Boston Folk Festival Sept. 16, the Boston Blues Festival at the Hatch Shell Sept. 24, and In a Pig's Eye Sept. 28, local country blues performer, Bill McQuaid, will be playing at Johnny D's in Somerville Oct. 12 on his distinctive 1931 National Steel guitar.

McQuaid plays songs primarily from the 1920s and 1930s, including Son House, Skip James, Robert Johnson, and Blind Lemon Jefferson. He has studied country blues with Paul Rishell, Scott Ainslie, and Doug Macleod and opened for Luther "Guitar Junior" Johnson, Chris Smither, Otis Day & the Knights, Rory Block, and Paul Geremia.

McQuaid released his debut CD, "Passing It On," in February of 2004. The CD has received airplay on WBOS, WERS, WGBH, WMBR, WSRK and WLUMB.

Said McQuaid, "I started playing drums when I was five, piano at 10, joined my cousin's GB band as a bass player at 14, and picked up the guitar in my

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early twenties."

He said he has been playing the country blues for about six years. "Robert Johnson was the first country blues artist that I became familiar with," said McQuaid. "It's hard to replicate and it's easy to get it wrong. The key is to understand that Robert was recycling what he had heard from several recording artists of the day and making it his own."

McQuaid said, "When I decide to play a song in front of any audience, it involves the process of learning the guitar parts, vocals, adjusting keys and tempo, and then finally figuring out how to own the song in some way. Sometimes it doesn't work no matter what you try and in that case, it's best to throw it out and move on."

McQuaid said, "I play Piedmont tunes by Blind Blake, Blind Boy Fuller, Gary Davis and

Willie McTell. The limiting factor on these is usually my inability to nail the guitar part down. Gary Davis is the toughest to learn. Skip James is one of my favorites, but it's hard to get the vocals right on his music." Also, "The songs from older delta players like Son House, Charlie Patton and Tommy Johnson are very enjoyable and are generally crowd pleasers. It's unbelievable that guys like these who had so little, came up with this music."

McQuaid said, "The guitar style of the delta blues is not as sophisticated as the Piedmont music, but it seems like this is where rock and roll came from. When you hear it, you can hear the blues dripping off the guitar!"

"I started out as a song writer and decided to take a lesson to improve my song writing," said McQuaid. "After one lesson the instructor suggested that I look into finger style guitar; reason being that my arrangements took the attention away from the groove at times, and this would probably result in losing the audience. Finger style arrangements could solve this issue by forcing one to hold down the groove with their thumb, thus keeping that constant attachment with the audience."

McQuaid next found and took lessons from Bertrand Laurence at Cambridge Music. He said, "We worked mostly on rag-time guitar and Nashville compositions from Chet, Merle, and Jerry Reed. It was a lot of work to get through only a handful of pieces."

Finally after several months,



Laurence introduced McQuaid to the Country Blues of Mississippi, John Hurt and Blind Boy Fuller. This led McQuaid to Paul Rishell. He said, "In my first lesson with Paul, I learned seven songs, got a history lesson, and realized that this music is what I had been looking for. The grooves satisfy the part of me that initially attracted me to the drums and bass. The guitar parts are sophisticated and challenging. The lyrics are very interesting, witty, silly, scary, and also preserve an important piece of American history." Also, "Audiences respond well to it and I can perform my repertoire solo, with a small combo, and more recently with a band."

This year, McQuaid got back to his own song writing. He said, "I had the opportunity to hang out with Guy Davis at SAMW this summer (WUMB Summer Acoustic Music Week) and talk about song writing in the style of the Country Blues."

McQuaid has just finished production on his next record. He said, "It doesn't have a title yet, but has more Piedmont songs than the last record. My plan is to work again with the same team as "Passing It On" (my first CD). I expect to work on it and hopefully release it in the upcoming year."