

The Sharp Dressed Band Is Looking...well...Sharp!



It's no secret that blues jams have been popping up all over. Musicians from all over Rhode Island and the surrounding states come out to share their talent while the rest of us come out to listen or maybe just dance our worries away. There is a pretty standard procedure of how things run in a blues jam. People write down their name and what instrument they play on a sign-up sheet and the MC calls out names and sticks a hodgepodge of talented musicians on stage together. The musicians whisper back and forth about what songs they know and who is going to sing what. And then the most amazing thing happens — five or so people who have never played together or never even met manage to create something extraordinary. They play their hearts out and you would swear their performance was rehearsed. I frequent blues jams and for people like me, the not musically talented, these nights are all about seeing who is playing where, deciding which event to attend and socializing.

Every once in a while someone on stage has the power to control the entire room with a guitar or drum solo ripping across the crowd. The chitchat silences as the audience listens in awe. I experienced one of those moments during the performance of young musician and Rhode Island native, Rob Davis. His guitar and voice silenced the crowd for two reasons — one, he sounded amazing, and two, he is only 19 and sounded amazing. How does someone so young have the knowledge and talent to not only keep up with performers with more experience, but to actually surpass musicians who have had more stage time than Rob has been alive? I needed to know the full story so I asked Rob for an interview.

You might imagine that Rob has been playing guitar since birth, but it's only been about seven years. Rob told me that the first time he picked up an instrument, he was in the sixth grade. He played the drums at school and the guitar at home. Later that year, he took a real interest in his musical education and talked to his parents about taking guitar lessons. Rob reminisced about his family's support, sharing that his mother, stepfather, grandma and father all pitched in through the years. Somewhere around his junior year of high school, he and some friends formed a band called The Sharp Dressed

Band.

The members of The Sharp Dressed Band are Sam Hemmendinger on bass, Jason Taylor on guitar, Evan Perry on drums, Dave Priri on piano and Rob Davis on guitar and vocals. Rob mentioned James Roy, who also sits in from time to time. The band played together for the first time at the Cranston West High School holiday show and their chosen song was "Sweet Home Alabama." Rob never really sang and never really wanted to, but the band needed a vocalist, so he stepped up to the microphone and away they went. Rob described how his voice has progressed since then; he has learned to control it and has even added a bit of a rasp. Soon winter turned to spring and the spring talent show was knocking at this band's door. They entered the show with two songs: "Pride and Joy" and "Sharp Dressed Man." In the show program, the band was listed as The Sharp Dressed Band and the name stuck.

Making the transition from school shows to local bars proved easier than expected. Rob walked into FitzPatrick's in Cranston for a jam when he was 16 years old. There he met Billy Lehourites, a frequenter of jams and an amazing guitarist. Billy mentioned to Rob that he was looking for a band to open for him at Christopher's just down the street and wondered if Rob's band would be interested. The members of The Sharp Dressed Band managed to slap together two and a half hours of music and they took the gig.

While the band sticks to mainly '60s, '70s and '80s classic rock, there seems to be no limit to Rob's ever expanding knowledge of genres and artists. "When playing acoustic my set list can be anything — rock, blues, jazz, top 40 hits. There is a huge difference between songs I know how to play and songs I perform. I could sit down for four hours straight and not play the same song twice."

Rob's fascination with different genres began when he started taking guitar lessons. "Guitar Hero had a huge influence on me. Yes, it may have been a stupid video game, but it really broadened my horizons and introduced me to artists I had never heard before."

After that, Rob was hooked on classic rock; he talked of raiding his father's CD cabinet for Led Zeppelin, AC/DC and Van Halen. Rob slowly fudged his way through these legendary albums on his own guitar. Senior year, Rob transitioned from rock and started taking to the blues. "My first time walking in here [Murphy's Law] was last year, scared shitless. I did not know any blues. I played stuff like Lynyrd Skynyrd, George Thorogood, and Tom Petty. People would ask 'Do you know Robert Cray, or Buddy Guy?'"

"I don't know them," he'd reply with a shrug. But Rob continued as he always did, learning new artists and absorbing new material, with a little help along the way. He became a blues aficionado in no time. "I learned a lot from these guys. The blues community really takes you under their wing."

Most talented musicians tend to see themselves becoming rich and famous in the future; however, for this modest artist that is not the case. "I'm not in it for the money, I'm really not. As long as I can put gas in my tank I'm happy."

Despite school never being his thing, Rob is working his butt off at URI to get his degree in sociology. Why not music? "I know a lot of music majors who graduated with their degree and they're just miserable. Music is no longer fun. To them it's just work. If one day one-third of my income is made by music, that'd be great. But I'm not going to force it."

As the night wore on, Rob and I continued to chat about the music scene in RI and how it's exploding. "The Cranston music scene has been growing exponentially over the past year, and I am so glad to be part of it! Every day my name gets out there just a little more and I have the Rhode Island music community to thank for that."

Free live music can be found seven days a week in your local townie bars. Near the end of our conversation, Rob delivered the quote of the night: "The age of the night club is dead; the local bar is now the place to be."

The Sharp Dressed Band will be performing on Block Island at Captain Nick's every Saturday and Sunday all summer long and Rob can be seen performing at local jams on the mainland Monday through Friday. For more information on the band, check out their Facebook page: facebook.com/TheSharpDressedBand