

THE BIG BOY LITTLE BAND

ON THE BRINK OF A BREAKTHROUGH

Bret Littlehales fronting Big Boy Little Band at Baltimore's Artscape.



"IT'S A LOUSY JOB. BUT SOMEBODY'S GOT TO DO IT," said Bret Littlehales, harmonica front man for his Big Boy Little Band and host of the weekly blues jam at the Zoo Bar Cafe at 3000 Connecticut Ave., NW, in Washington, D.C. And he's been emceeing this Thursday night tradition for fully half of its decade long run, having replaced harp man Flatfoot Sam & the Educated Fools (Sam Peightal) and before him, bassist Brian MacGregor and drummer Jeff Lodson. For Bret, this duty is unquestionably a labor of love to a degree but his motive for assuming this often stressful responsibility is not quite one hundred percent altruistic. "What better way is there to ensure that we as the house band rehearse at least once a week. And in addition, Steve McKinney [the owner] grants us one Saturday night a month, in reality at least five gigs here keeping us sharp," he added.

This stout grizzled veteran of the Washington blues scene who sports his signature skullcap is a familiar figure on these evenings. With clipboard in hand, he ranges up and down the long corridor of this club, rounding up candidates for each subsequent installment after his Big Boy Little Band has completed its hour long opening set. Always the diplomat, Bret pleads patience to those waiting to take their turn on the stage. "Some nights are tough. I might have too many harmonicas to accommodate or newcomers who expect that this is an open mike. Others are easy, when mostly regulars show up who know the routine," he said. Politely but firmly, Bret, as a reluctant bouncer, pro-

hibits solo acts (and all non-blues artists) from performing and instead mixes and matches the requisite band members from the sign up sheet, be they drummers (always in short supply), bassists, guitarists, or horn players. "Yeah, over the years we've had some strange bedfellows thrown together by chance who have gone on to discover that they should remain intact as a unit," Bret added, proud that he could be an unwitting catalyst in the process of creating new blues ensembles.

Bret fully intends to continue in this role at least for the present but perhaps sensing that for him a lot of water had gone under the bridge career-wise, he also has sought especially this past year to

broaden his horizons well beyond the friendly confines of this cozy womb of a blues haunt, wherein he's taken up residence for nearly a dozen years. It may have started several months ago when his outfit recorded a seven song CD (some original compositions by Bret) which he began using as a calling card, *The Secret Cool Demo*, a long overdue project that may have paved the way for his invitation to play before a huge enthusiastic crowd at last summer's Artscape jamboree in Baltimore. But no less significant was Bret's decision to enter his group in the DC Blues Society sponsored "Battle of the Bands," whose winner would be dispatched to Memphis, TN, to

then compete as the area representative in the International Blues Challenge (IBC) on January 20-23. Held last October 10, at the American Legion Post 268 at 11225 Fern St. in Wheaton, MD, the showdown featured some fine regional contenders like Blue Dog, Dirty Pool Blues, Gina DeSimone & the Moaners, Karl Stoll and The Danger Zone, Lady Rose, Stack O'Blues, The Andy Poxon Band, and The Mike Lucci Band. But the Big Boy Little Band emerged victorious, which not only earned it a trip to the Home of the Blues but also a lot of local exposure, being also rewarded as an opener on the College Park Blues Festival on November 7, followed by a slew of fundraising gigs—at JV's Restaurant in Falls Church, VA, on December 26, the Old Bowie Town Grille in Bowie, MD, on January 9, and Bangkok Blues, Falls Church, VA, on January 17, just to name a few.

When Bret and his band, Robbie Leebrick on drums, Matt Kelley on guitar, and Steve "Wolf" Crescenze

STORY & PHOTOGRAPHS BY LARRY BENICEWICZ

BIG BOY LITTLE

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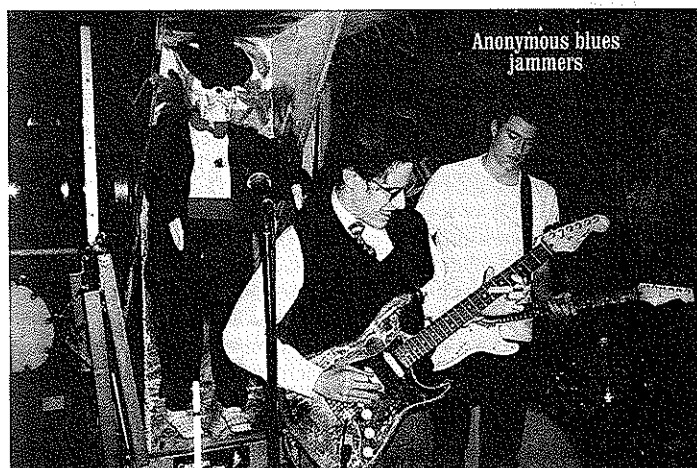
Exterior of Zoo Bar Café, Washington, DC



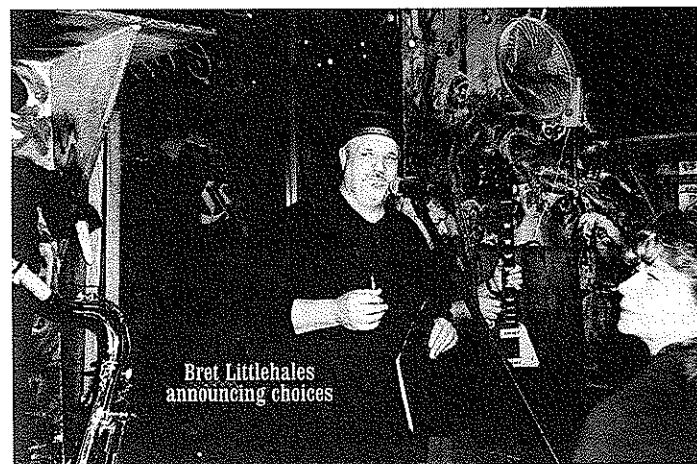
Anonymous blues jammers



Anonymous blues jammers



Bret Littlehales announcing choices



on bass, arrived in Memphis, they knew that they had their work cut out for them, as they were facing 110 other challengers from thirty-nine states and fourteen different countries in eleven separate venues on fabled Beale Steet, including the new and old Daisy theatres and B.B. King's club. At stake was a \$2000 cash incentive, a slot on a scheduled "Blues Cruise," and a guaranteed lock on a host of minor festivals. After registering on Wednesday, the Big Boy Little Band took on nine other outfits at the Blues City Café on Thursday night. And the next evening before four judges, they vied with the same opponents. It was at B.B. King's club early Saturday morning that they were apprised that they had been chosen as one of the eleven finalists. On that same Saturday at the Orpheum, the bands that comprised this select company went head to head, with Grady Champion of the Mississippi Delta Blues Society of Indianola, MS, being accorded first place, followed by the Karen Lovely band from the Cascade Blues Association from Portland, OR, and Cheryl Renee and Them Bones of the Cincinnati Blues Society. "They never revealed exactly where we finished, only the top three spots," said Bret. Nevertheless, Matt Kelley, Bret's gifted 26-year-old guitarist walked away with the Albert King Guitar award, bestowed much on the strength of his scintillating solo passage in B.B. King's "How Blue Can You Get." Accompanying this honor was quite a prize as well—a custom made hollow bodied Gibson ES-335 guitar and matching amp.

Although Bret seemed disappointed that he didn't take home all the marbles, he could console himself with one thought—more than one act conceded that his band was head and shoulders above most of the contestants. "After hearing your opening, I wanted to pack up and go home," confessed one worthy adversary, immediately recognizing the ease with which Bret approached blues material. But this expertise, this comfort zone in the blues, did not occur overnight. In fact, it was a lifetime in the making.

Bret Littlehales was born in Washington, D.C., on September 1, 1951 and he credits his father, then a photographer for National Geographic, for encouraging him in his musical pursuits. "My dad was an authentic 'folkie' during that period and I remember particularly

that he loved to listen to numbers from [collector/ethnomusicologist] Harry Smith's Folkways collection, which included selections by Robert Johnson, Leadbelly, and the Memphis Jug Band," said Bret, who received quite an foundation in roots music from this six-LP, 84 track compilation, *Anthology of American Folk Music*, which spanned the years 1927-1932. By age 13, while in junior high school, he had acquired his first guitar, an acoustic sort, and was playing along to many of his father's recordings. However, he couldn't afford an electric model; so he entertained the idea of switching to another less expensive instrument. "It just so happened that my grandfather had an old harmonica tucked away in a drawer and it was tuned in the same key as one of my favorite tunes, the Yardbirds' 'I'm A Man.' Let's say that I became a quick learner," he added. And not long after in 1967, Bret with some chums formed his first "basement" group, the Robert Dusty Blues Band (evidently a moniker for Robert Johnson).

At that time, a young guitarist the same age as Bret, Rob Ewan (brother of local harp great Bruce) was creating quite a sensation at Bethesda-Chevy Chase High and in fact had been playing in a summer blues group, Hunk O' Funk, fronted by Mark Wenner, two years his senior at the same school. After Wenner went on to Columbia University, Rob Ewan (now Bobby Radcliff) became a free agent and Bret recruited him for his own outfit. "Since we were both from the same vicinity, we changed the name to the Northwest Blues Band. But we still had to rename ourselves shortly thereafter because Frank Richards, a DJ of WHFS, after playing a tape of ours on the air, misspoke, calling us the Northside Blues Band, which sounded cool enough for us [to retain]," said Bret.

Still in high school, both Bret (at St. Albans) and Rob, acknowledged "advanced disciples of the blues," received quite a blues education, first by listening in to black DJ Bob "Nighthawk" Terry's (born Bobby Joe Horn) blues show over WOL-AM and then by frequenting the Ambassador Theatre located at 2454 18th St and Columbia Road, N.W. Originally intended as a venue presenting psychedelic fare, it had a great two-year run before succumbing to the wrecking ball on September 29th 1969. "We certainly had some moments there seeing

blues stars such as Junior Wells, Buddy Guy, John Lee Hooker, and Canned Heat. A highlight from that period was actually driving James Cotton into the city from the airport," said Bret. Further completing their thorough blues indoctrination during this time frame was record collecting. "I remember the first time we heard *West Side Soul* on Delmark by Magic Sam [Maghett]. It knocked our socks off. In fact, Rob took off to the Ann Arbor [MI] Blues Festival [August, 1969] just to meet him. When he got back, he was transformed and began taking on most of our vocal duties," added Bret.

In 1969, the Northside Blues Band was also performing regularly at the Emergency in Georgetown, a 200-seat, non-alcoholic rock club, which on occasion featured A-list acts of that era—The Kinks, Cold Blood, Bob Seger, and Fairport Convention—as well as other locals on the order of Grin with Nils Lofgren. Its manager and co-owner, Mike Schreiber, had built quite a reputation as impresario, booking acts especially at the Merriweather Post Pavilion in Columbia, MD (and later in 1976 at the Warner Theater, which he opened, and the late lamented Bayou in Georgetown, which he bought). In 1984 he became the founding member and vice-president of The Washington Area Music Association (WAMA), which to this day recognizes excellence in area artists.

However, by late 1969, Bret had to dissolve the Northside in order to attend Cornell University in Ithaca, NY, while Rob Ewan remained behind, thereafter changing his name to Bobby Radcliff. Upon arrival in Upstate New York, he immediately realized that unlike Washington, D.C., he had stumbled upon an "incredible opportunity"—a town totally given over to partying. "First of all, everyone in the musical community knew everybody else [they were unionized] and there were plenty of gigs to go around, be they frat houses or bars. Moreover, the drinking age was eighteen," he said. And it wasn't difficult to find musicians ready, willing, and able to play. Among the regulars already on the scene were harp player, Hugh Craig (later Huey Lewis) leading an eclectic aggregate, Slippery Elm, and Wells Kelly, drummer of Buffolongo, who with guitarist Larry Hoppen, would later add Baltimore-born, John Hall (now a U.S. Congressman) and form Orleans. Soon, Bret hooked

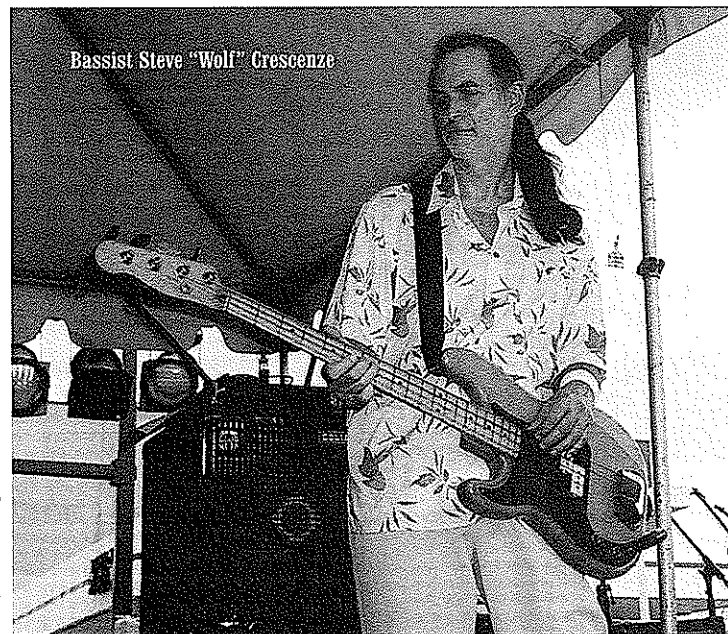
up with a "bluegrass oriented" guitarist of note, Russ Barenberg, and formed his first band, the eponymous Bret Littlehales Band. Not long after, Bret added a horn section and rechristened this new experiment, Brute, a group with definitely more "punch," not to mention versatility, than its predecessor. At that juncture in his career, he was becoming more and more intrigued by the robust Stax-Volt sound of that period and artists such as William Bell and Otis Redding. But his overriding influence was actually the brass driven blues band of Paul Butterfield. In fact, Bret struck up an acquaintance with this already legendary harp player, who in 1970 still had saxophonists David Sanborn and Gene Dinwiddie on board in his pre-Better Days configuration. "He referred to me as [unprintable] which I interpreted as a term of endearment," said Bret with a measure of pride.

Things for a while seemed to be looking up for Brute (which he formed after dropping out of Cornell after two years) and indeed two record companies approached Bret about a recording session. "The first was a precursor of Rounder and the second was Liberty, a label which had already contracted Canned Heat and reissued an Albert Collins album and was looking to establish a strong blues presence. A talent scout from them [the latter] came by and offered us a deal whereby he would pay half for a demo," said Bret, who in retrospect had some regrets about ultimately nixing the proposal. "Well, we were so young and naïve then and had heard so many bad things about the industry," he added. Nonetheless, this ambivalence on his part proved to be a moot point, as the band was already on the verge of breaking up.

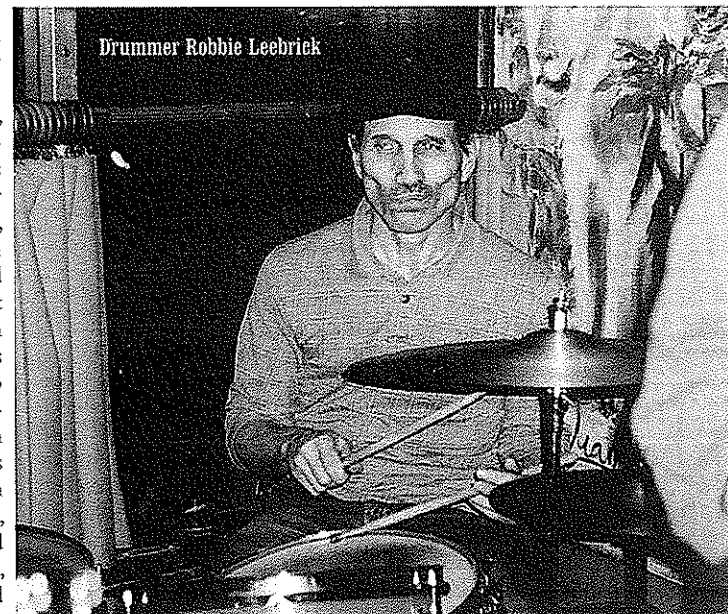
After four years in Ithaca, Bret, perhaps a bit burned out and disillusioned, decided to follow in his father's footsteps as a photographer by enrolling in a four year college, the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence. "Suddenly it seemed that I found my calling and set about to be the best I could be in this profession," said Bret. As far as blues was concerned, he decided to just remain a spectator and cheerleader. During this period, he often journeyed to Boston to stay with his cousin, Pierre Beauregard (whom he had taught to play the harp), who along with drummer Richard Murray (his high school drummer), bassist Steve "Baby Jake" Jacobs, and



Guitarist Matt Kelley



Bassist Steve "Wolf" Crescenze



Drummer Robbie Leebrick

BIG BOY LITTLE

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Bassist Steve Potter



guitarist Tom Principato comprised the wildly popular and then Bean Town-based, Powerhouse. "By the time I graduated in 1976, it just didn't seem a propitious time revert to my former life as a player. The blues seemed to be falling out of favor and besides that, I met my wife of 34 years while enrolled there," added Bret.

In 1976 with diploma in hand, he and his wife moved back to the Washington area. And upon his return, he couldn't help but notice that the blues landscape had changed dramatically. His former guitarist, Bobby Radcliff, had not only recorded in his absence (a 1974 debut single for Billy Hancock's short-lived Aladdin records) but also had relocated to New York (where he still resides). Mark Wenner, his own Big Apple experience behind him, was now at the helm of the classic lineup (Jimmy Thackery, guitar, Pete Ragusa, drums, and Jan Zukowski, bass) of the seemingly ubiquitous and oft recorded Nighthawks. And

when Powerhouse paid a call to its home town, Bret discovered that in the interim, his pupil's (Pierre Beauregard) skills on the harmonica had far outstripped his own. "It really pained me not being a part of what was happening and especially to see how my contemporaries and peers had progressed. They served as constant reminders of what I could have been. Nonetheless, I resolved to stay committed to my family [he would father three daughters] and new career," said Bret.

For the next sixteen years or so, Bret remained a devoted family man and acquired quite a reputation as top-notch photographer, having had several expositions to his credit and contributions to national magazines such as *National Geographic*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Forbes*, as well as a handful of local publications. But he hadn't entirely neglected the blues during this long hiatus from performing. "At home, I still practiced the acoustic guitar, finger picking style, emulating bluesmen such as Mississippi John



Guitarist Rusty Bogart

Hurt," said Bret.

In 1992, guitarist and staff writer for the *Washington Post*, Terence McArdle, approached him about the possibility of filling a vacancy in his band, Big Trouble. And they were big shoes to fill indeed, those of Ted Watkins, who was sort of a jack of all trades (sax, harp, etc.) and who was also trying to simultaneously honor gigs in yet another outfit, Four On The Floor, but found he couldn't do both. Bret by now had really gotten the itch to return to the public arena and when he broached this sensitive subject to his wife, to his surprise she gave him her blessing. But first he would have to go out and purchase an electric guitar. "When I joined Terence's band, I sort of functioned at his whim or convenience, be it handling the rhythm guitar chores or the harp parts," said Bret, who professed to have had an enormous respect for this bandleader, "another kindred blues fanatic" like himself.

During that era of the early

90s, Big Trouble—Myco Johnson on percussion, Liz Lohr on keyboards, Ted Heitz on five string bass, McArdle on lead guitar and vocals, and Bret on harp and rhythm—were a band very much in demand in both Baltimore and Washington. In Fell's Point in Charm City, they appeared at the venerable Cat's Eye Pub and the now defunct Full Moon Saloon. In the Nation's Capital, they were fixtures at clubs like Adams Morgan's Roxanne and Chief Ike's Mambo Room. Furthermore in the D.C. area, they became darlings of the swing band circuit and would pack them in at larger venues like Glen Echo and Mark Gretschel's now sadly shuttered Tornado Alley in the close suburb of Wheaton. At this latter room, Big Trouble warmed up the audience for big name acts like Bobby Radcliff (with whom Bret rekindled an old friendship), Junior Wells, and James Cotton (who fondly remembered his chauffeur from the 60s). "After about two years with Terence, I felt I was really

getting some of my old chops back and eventually I grew tired of just backing him up. My ego compelled me to break out on my own. Yet it was an amicable parting," said Bret.

It was Ward Gaines, co-author *Blues With a Feeling: The Little Walter Story*, who first introduced Bret to Fairfax's Steve Smith, erstwhile guitarist and leader of the local blues band, Marked Deck, which he had just dissolved. And a partnership soon ensued with the formation of the group, the Meteors, named after the hallowed first label of Elmore James. "Steve was just what I needed. He was an aggressive booking agent and I wanted to work," said Bret. Among the memorable engagements contracted by Steve during this time frame were the Pennsylvania Avenue Bar-be-cue Battle, a berth on the fledgling Hagerstown Blues Festival, and a battle of the bands competition (which they won) at the still much missed Fleetwood's in Old Town, Alexandria, VA. And the Meteors also became familiar

faces at Tornado Alley, opening for Koko Taylor, Omar (Dykes) & the Howlers, Billy Boy Arnold, Junior Wells, and Anson Funderburgh (with Sam Myers). Indeed, the Meteors were so active during this four year stretch that Bret began to feel that he had compensated somewhat for all the time he had lost when out of the public spotlight.

Although Bret was fronting the Meteors and assuming most of the vocal responsibilities, he still sensed that it was Steve's band. "In Ithaca, I peaked and now after undergoing this seven-year apprenticeship, I began to really feel on top of my game again," said Bret, who, after his departure, bequeathed his PA to Steve. But Bret readily admits that the decision to part ways with Steve was made a lot more easily by the availability of a most highly esteemed guitarist, Rusty Bogart, with whom he could start anew.

Rusty Bogart for decades has had a distinguished career in a procession of notable Mid-Atlantic groups, including the J Street

Jumpers, the Uptown Rhythm Kings, and Big Joe (Maher) & the Dynafloes. "Rusty and I were actually well acquainted, having worked together as kids at Discount Records on Connecticut Ave [near Dupont Circle], the greatest blues store ever," said Bret. And with the addition of Eric Shramek on bass, ex-McArdle Blues Flames/Uptown Rhythm Kings keyboardist, Arthur Gerstein, and local "gun for hire" Jeff Lodson on drums, the resurrected Bret Littlehales Band, vintage 1998, was back in business. After a couple of gigs, though, Bret thought that a name change might be in order. "Let's face it. Bret Littlehales is a lot for folks to wrap themselves around; so almost as a joke, I came up with Big Boy Little. And it stuck," he added.

From the beginning, the Big Boy Little Band began evolving, sometimes out of necessity. And personnel changes dictated the direction the band was taking. First, Eric Shramek left to pursue jazz undertakings and he was replaced

by seasoned pro, Steve Potter, longtime bassist for harp man Glenn Moomau's Blue Flames, still based at Bertha's in Fell's Point, Baltimore. Potter, too, was succeeded by Kevin Forder, who held down that position for a few years until relatively recently. "One of the biggest problems was that the band didn't want to rehearse, especially drummer Jeff Lodson. Luckily, Rusty and I had not only the same tastes in music but also were oriented toward improvisation. So, we were forced to take long solos," said Bret, who often imagined himself as a one-man horn section. Laziness was one thing, but not being reliable was a totally different issue and as time wore on, Lodson grew less and less dependable. "It was tough letting him go but we really received quite an able bodied percussionist in the person of [Moomau sideman] Robbie Leebrick without missing a beat," added Bret.

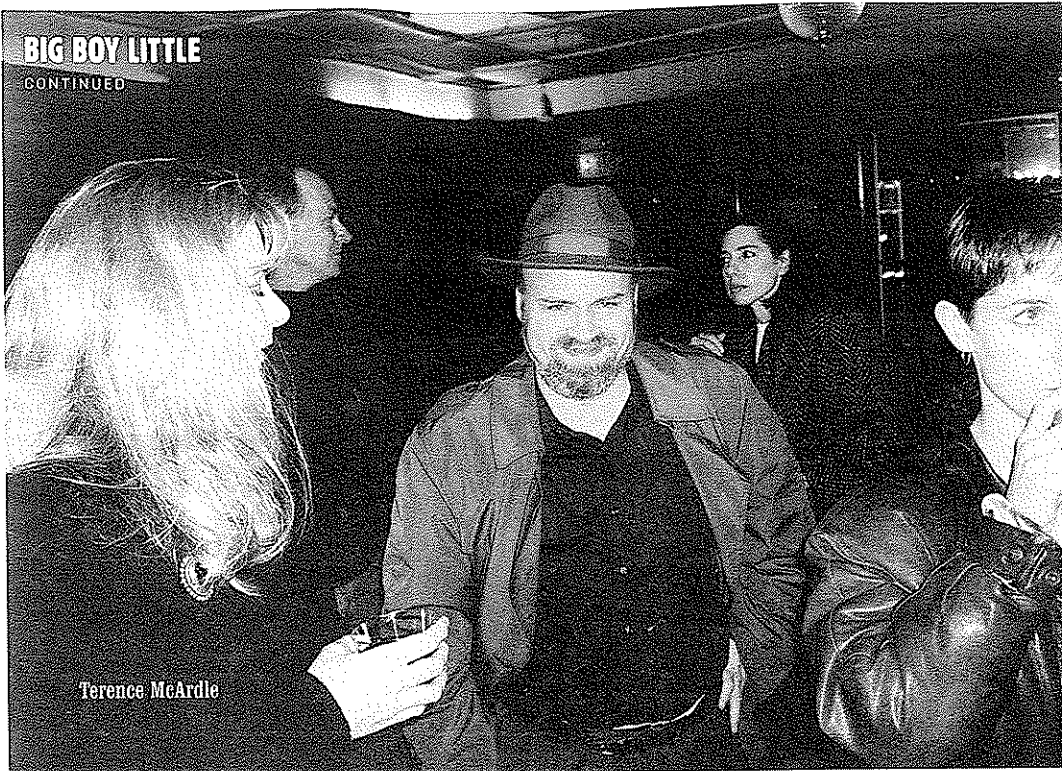
One artist of note who contributed mightily to lending a New Orleans flavor to the Big Boy



Bret Littlehales fronting Big Boy Little Band at Baltimore's Artscape.

BIG BOY LITTLE

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Terence McArdle

Little Band was Irving Bannister. Bannister was a guitarist in some historic Crescent City R&B outfits, including that of James "Sugar Boy" Crawford and the Shaweez. In the sixties, he became a studio musician for famed engineer Cosimo Matassa's second facility at 523 Gov. Nicholls St in the French Quarter. Among his many sessions, he appeared on two of soul crooner Danny White's hits, "Loan Me Your Handkerchief" and "Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye," recordings of which both Bret and Rusty Bogart, as New Orleans music aficionados, were well acquainted. In 2005, Bannister was displaced by Hurricane Katrina, and to make a long story short, as if by miracle, plopped into the laps of these incredulous musicians, who, of course, welcomed him into the band with open arms. "During his two-year tenure with our group, he alternated with Rusty, each taking a turn at lead and rhythm guitar," said Bret, who often sits in on the septuagenarian's gigs at Margaritaville in the French Quarter, where Bannister & his All Stars currently hold down the fort as house band. At least two of these collaborations between Bret, Rusty, and Bannister's band at Jimmy Buffet's Big Easy franchise can be viewed on YouTube.

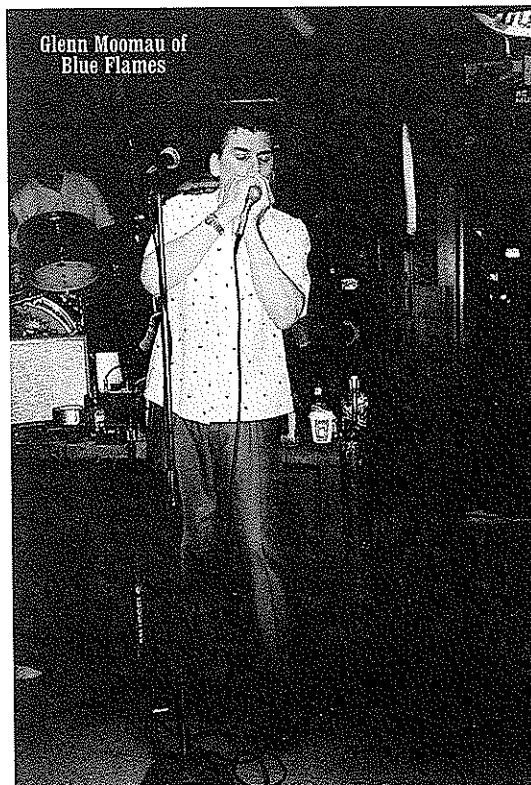
I have to admit that I was ready to throw in the towel in 2008 when both Rusty and Kevin quit about the same time," said Bret.

Rusty Bogart had to tend to his aged mother in Florida and he, too, took a leave of absence from Glenn Moomau's ensemble; whereas bassist Kevin Forder left the Big Boy Little Band to care for a new set of twins in his family. But it was drummer Robbie Leebrick who convinced him to hang on to the "good thing that he had." Soon, Bret was receiving e-mails from all manner of guitarists seeking the openings. But as

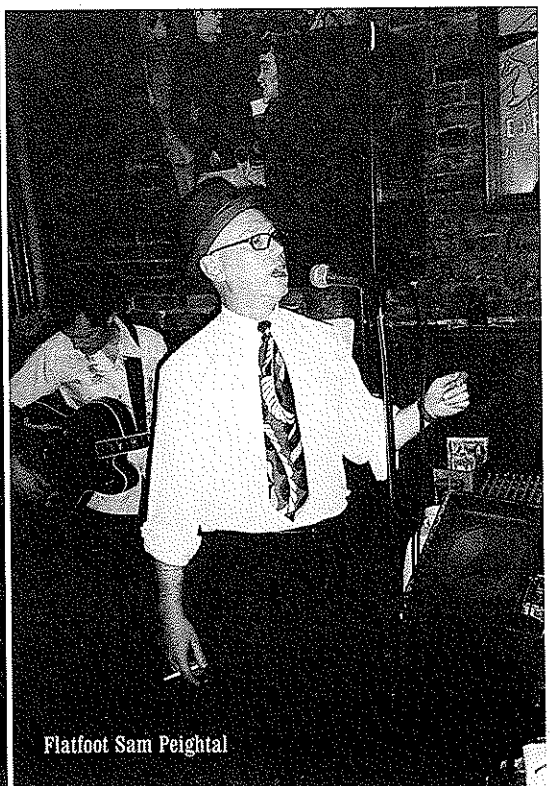
luck or fate would have it, the two positions were quickly occupied, courtesy of Steve "Wolf" Crescenze. Bassist Crescenze, who restores antique carousel figures by day, was a seasoned professional in the Washington, D.C., musical community as far back as the 60s, when he was an integral part of the renowned garage band, Sassafas. Since then, he has backed several local blues luminaries, such as Daryl Davis, Linwood

Taylor, and Clarence "Bluesman" Turner. Now leading the group, The Idle Americans, Crescenze and his hot shot guitarist in the same band, Matt Kelley, also another blues jam habitué, stepped up. "Actually it was a question of choosing between two fine lead guitarists, Matt Kelley and Robert Frahm, and it was settled when Robert joined up with Glenn," added Bret, who has been immensely gratified with this turn of events.

Yes, Bret finally leads a most expert and cohesive unit in which he can be justifiably be proud, has written a slew of solid compositions, and has managed to broaden his sphere of influence. But there remains still one impediment to fulfillment as an artist. And in his long history, it's been more of a bugbear, his *bete noire*, so to speak—that one definitive recording to finally put him over the top. But lately he's taken steps to remedy that shortcoming as well. The band went over to record nine tracks for Bill Wax, the highly influential program director of B.B. King's "Bluesville" broadcast on XM Satellite Radio. Nonetheless, Bret still remains philosophical about whether he will achieve this hitherto elusive, but perhaps essential, goal. "If it [my effort] comes up short, so be it. I have absolutely no regrets. I've given it my best shot. And I can safely say that throughout the many years, if nothing else, it's been one hell of a great ride."



Glenn Moomau of Blue Flames



Flatfoot Sam Peightal