

## Southern Maryland Newspapers

### Howlin' Blues

Beach Cove jam rolls on, and Wolf has a new band

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Steve "Wolf" Crescenze, left, of Welcome plays with Hot Rods and Old Gas, the host band for Wednesday night blues jams at the Beach Cove. He plays in three groups, including Big Boy Little Band, which recently qualified for the annual International Blues Challenge in Memphis.



The "hot rods," three potential guitar soloists: Tom Maxwell, left, Andy Poxon and Zach Sweeney.



Drummer Mike O'Donnell played in Idle Americans, which was Wolf's main band last year. Sweeney, right, still plays with the group.



Guitarist and vocalist Tom Maxwell previously played in an indie rock band, but even then he would play blues licks, he said.



Andy Poxon of Crofton juggles playing in a busy blues band with advanced classes in high school.

In 2008, ACME Blues Company was splintering apart and a new punk-blues outfit — they called themselves the Idle Americans — was picking up gigs fast enough to appease Steve “Wolf” Crescenze’s seemingly insatiable appetite for playing for a crowd. (Though Wolf is not a drinker, it seems plausible that when he plays six gigs a week, he spends the seventh night howling at the moon in frustration.)

The issue with the Idle Americans, though, came to be that Matt Kelley, the lead vocalist and guitarist, sort of wanted the band to be his. But Wolf wanted the same thing. Right, and Kelley ...

In short, the Idle Americans have continued without Wolf, who has since invested more energy into yet another year-old group, Hot Rods and Old Gas, which is now his main band — if Wolf even has a main band.

Lately, the Welcome resident and retired shop teacher at John Hanson Middle School in Waldorf has three outfits in his rotation. As mentioned, there is Hot Rods and Old Gas, with Wolf on bass, Mike O’Donnell on drums, Tom Maxwell on guitar, Andy Poxon on guitar, Zach Sweeney on guitar and Lisa Lim on ... guitar.

Wolf’s newer roots-rock-blues project is dubbed Lisa Lim and Over the Limit, which features Lim, Maxwell, Wolf and Steve Brennan on drums.

Moving on to group three, Big Boy Little Band, which Wolf joined about a year ago, is a traditional blues outfit based in Washington, D.C. The band’s namesake and featured player is Bret Littlehales, but the quartet also includes Kelley and Robby Leebrick on drums. Recently,

Big Boy Little Band took top prize at the D.C. Blues Society's annual battle of the blues bands. For that, the group earned a spot at the 2010 International Blues Challenge in Memphis.

On a recent Wednesday night at the Beach Cove, Wolf introduces his bandmates as "the hot rods" and himself as "the old gas." For the weekly blues jam, the host band gets things rolling with a 45-minute set. Wednesday is also bike night, and early on the bikers outnumber musicians. No one seems to be paying much attention to the deciding game of the World Series. Rather, in what nearly resembles a café scene, patrons gather near the bar and in the dining room of the restaurant to listen to the band.

Beach Cove's new owner, Kerry Harrington, is tending bar. He also owns Renegade Classics, a motorcycle clothing store in Prince Frederick, and, as he told the public at a Chesapeake Beach Town Hall meeting in May, a construction company.

Motorcyclists attended the meeting to support Harrington's desire to buy and reopen the Beach Cove, which closed at the end of last year, and to deny rumors that the new establishment would encourage motorcycle gangs. "I own a construction company, too, but nobody is concerned about carpenters coming in," he said.

Harrington had organized Beach Cove's bike night for its previous owner. Then, too, the event coincided with Wolf's blues jam. And when the restaurant and bar reopened in June, one of the first things Harrington did was bring the jam back.

In a sense, Hot Rods is Idle Americans without the same jagged edge (one found that mainly in Kelley, a young, energetic bluesman). Even still, Hot Rods has similar genre-bending tendencies, and Wolf is correct when he calls it a "guitar show," with Sweeney "providing the icing on the cake." At times, tunes by legends ranging from Howlin' Wolf to Sonny Landreth are merely the backdrop for contained improvisations.

The Idle Americans' hook was something along the lines of a few young guys who play old and one old guy who plays young. Hot Rods, though, is even more youthful. In fact, while Poxon sings T-Bone Walker's "Long Distance Blues," his parents are in the audience, and ready to drive him back to their home in Crofton after the set so he can finish his homework. Standing in the middle of three potential soloists, the young prodigy sports an orange-red afro the size of a disco ball.

After meeting Poxon at a blues jam near the District, Wolf invited him to attend his second area jam at Fat Boys Country Store in Leonardtown. He also invited Poxon's group, the Andy Poxon Band, to open for the Idle Americans. At 12, Poxon liked metal and hard rock. All that changed when he went to a B.B. King concert. After that, Poxon started listening to blues CDs and taking lessons from blues guitarist Tony Fazio.

"He picked up stuff really fast and just kind of had that desire and a knack for picking it up," Fazio said on the phone.

Poxon's band, which tied for third at the D.C. Blues Society band contest, mostly plays originals. Lyrically, some Poxon tunes are directly inspired by the blues canon, but others are more inspired by boring high school math classes, which is not to say Poxon is slacking off. He's on track to graduate a year early from South River High School, where he plays in the jazz band, sings in the chorus and is preparing to take an advanced music theory course. If all goes according to plan, Poxon will get accepted by the Berklee College of Music.

Maxwell, who lives in Gainesville, Va., attends college and coaches swimming, is also new to the blues. Like Poxon, though, the genre appears to be in his DNA. Even in the indie band he last played in, Maxwell insisted playing blues licks, and his hoarse vocals seem well suited to a blues/country number like “Mind Your Own Business.” He says he recently started wearing suits, and now a fedora hat obscures his eyes.

There’s only a short lag between Hot Rods’ set and the beginning of the jam. Wolf, as it happens, familiarizes himself with the styles of the musicians (most come regularly) and has developed a knack for patching together groups that have an easy time discovering their gestalt.

Barry Grubbs and Chris Everett, both instructors at Hot Licks Guitar Shop in Waldorf, do not play in a band but are drawn to the jam for one simple reason: It’s a chance to play some blues.

That attitude is shared by the rest of the lot. Gary Pape, who had been playing upright bass with a local Irish band, recently decided to drag out his electric bass for the first time since the 1960s, and the jam is a good place to sharpen up. (Toward the end of the night, Coe Anderson of The Fabulous Hubcaps will break out a fiddle.)

Once the first group has found its bearings, Wolf sits down to talk. He got his nickname from an unruly student in the 1970s around the time Wolfman Jack appeared in “American Graffiti.” Honestly, when I look at a picture of Wolfman, I don’t see the sinewy Wolf.

Anyway, aren’t there plenty of old guys to start bands with? “Well, the old guys can’t keep us,” he says. “They have too many obligations and stuff.” Wolf is playing four or five nights a week. Most of his 2010 is already locked up.

It’s going to be a madhouse in Memphis: Ten bands will perform in as many packed bars when the contest starts in January.

There’s some luck involved, as bands are randomly placed in competing brackets, meaning great bands will get left behind and mediocre bands will break through. The winner goes on a blues cruise, earns prize money and wins some professional PR.

What are his chances?

Wolf says that Big Boy’s mom wisely puts it at 50-50: “You’re going to either win or lose.”

### **If you go**

A blues jam is held from 8 p.m.-midnight on Wednesdays at the Beach Cove, 8416 Bayside Road, Chesapeake Beach. Beach Cove’s entertainment includes karaoke on Friday and bands on Saturdays. Go to [www.wolfsmusicweekly.com](http://www.wolfsmusicweekly.com).