

The Independent

Musician shoulders blues burden

'Wolf' has role in 3 local bands, one wins award

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After two nights of performances at the International Blues Challenge, 110 bands — representing 14 countries and 39 states — were narrowed down to 11. Representing the D.C. Blues Society, Big Boy Little Band, which features Welcome's Steve "Wolf" Crescenze on bass, made that final cut, and narrowly missed taking home the top prize.

The 26th annual Blues Challenge, which is known for launching the careers of Susan Tedeschi and Zac Harmon, was held from Jan. 21 to 23 in Memphis, Tenn., and the final 11 bands played in the historic Orpheum Theatre on Beale Street.

Crescenze, a retired shop teacher at John Hanson Middle School in Waldorf, plays in three bands, hosts several area jams and has a gig almost every night. He joined Big Boy Little, a traditional blues outfit founded by Bret Littlehales, about two years ago.



Staff photo by DARWIN WEIGEL
Steve "Wolf" Crescenze, left, of Welcome plays in three area blues bands, including The Big Boy Little Band, which recently made the finals of the 26th annual International Blues Challenge in Memphis, Tenn. Here, he plays with Hot Rods and Old Gas.



Littlehales has been fronting bands and playing harp around the District since the 1960s. His group's guiding philosophy is, "It's not rock, it's not jazz, it's blues, and playing blues is what we do."

Currently the house band at the Zoo Bar Café in the District, Big Boy Little has opened for B.B. King, Koko Taylor and Junior Wells, the very bands they frequently cover.

"He expects a high level of performance," Crescenze said of Littlehales. "But it's a lot of fun."

To earn a spot at the Blues Challenge, Big Boy Little won DC Blues Society's annual band competition. To raise money for the trip, fundraisers were held at clubs around the District.

During the Blues Challenge, Beale Street is blocked off to traffic and packed with blues fans, who roam the streets listening for a band that piques their interest. Ten bands play in 11 different Beale Street venues during the first two nights. And after playing two 25-minute sets before two sets of judges, a band from each bracket was chosen for the finals.

On the first night of competition, Big Boy Little had the opening slot. "Usually that's the kiss of death," Crescenze said. "But we jumped up there and had the set of our life, both nights."

Groups are judged on originality, blues content, stage presence, virtuosity and overall performance. Big Boy Little's set included three original songs and King's "How Blue Can you Get?" which set up a solo opportunity for 26-year-old guitarist Matt Kelley which earned him the prestigious Albert King award for top guitarist.

In the finals, each set was limited to 15 minutes, and Crescenze thinks that might have hurt the band's chances of earning the top prize. Big Boy Little's main strength is its versatility, he said, and it's tough to demonstrate that with just three songs.

Still, just making the finals was a thrill. After their set on the second night, members of the band and their fans walked across the street to B.B. King Blues Club, where judges were announcing the winners of each bracket.

Then the good news came across the loudspeaker: Big Boy Little had made the finals.

"It was like pandemonium," Crescenze said. "People were yelling and jumping up and down. It was really exciting."

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Live blues

Steve "Wolf" Crescenze will play with his third band Lisa Lim & Over the Limit at 9:30 p.m. Feb. 12 at Murphy's Pub, 6971 Indian Head Highway, Bryans Road. There is no cover. Call 301-375-9230. For information about blues in region, go to www.wolfsmusicweekly.com.

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