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Sunny Girl: How blue can she get?

Born under a good sign

BY KATHLEEN DAVIS

Gritty blues emanates from the stage at Tenny Street Roadhouse in Dearborn. The center of attention is a young harmonica player and singer named Sunny Girl, who's wailing convincingly on her harp.

Behind me, someone remarks, "Wow, she acts a bit grown up for a 15-year-old, doesn't she?"

Which is only half-true, because Sunny Girl is just 12.

She's already played with several blues greats, including Buddy Guy and James Cotton. She's put out her own CD and has caused a buzz in the local blues community for seven years. She works a room like a grizzled pro.

I first meet Sunny Girl in a casual setting. I'm surprised to see a 4-foot-10 girl with a ponytail and summer clothes. Surprised even more to hear that she listens to Alicia Keys and Shakira. But when she shakes my hand with a firm two-handed grip, cocks her head slightly and smiles sweetly, I know I'm not dealing with just any preteen.

Sunny Girl was born on the same day as harmonica impresario Junior Wells (only 56 years later). She started humming before she could talk and received an electric keyboard for her third birthday. She hails from a family of music lovers and players, including her dad, who was a member of the Detroit Blues Society, and her sister, 5-year-old "Rockin' Robin," who's developing her own musical chops.

Harmonica stalwart Larry Everhart of acoustic trio Maggie's Farm recalls a Sunday afternoon in 1996 when Sunny Girl's dad brought her to the Attic Bar in Hamtramck, where Everhart was hosting a harp workshop.

"There was this little girl with a bunch of 30- to 40-year-old guys that were probably still hungover from the night before," Everhart says.

After two or three harmonica workshops, Sunny Girl wanted to take the stage. A year later she went to the Society for the Preservation and Advancement of the Harmonica convention, where she met Larry "The Iceman" Eisenberg, who became her teacher and mentor. She studied with him until he moved to Florida in 1999.

Last year, she released her first CD, *Mother Earth It's Tyme to Tune-Up*, on her own Motor Town Records label, which is run by her manager/father. "I work for her now," he says with a chuckle.

You're undoubtedly wondering what a 12-year-old has to feel blue about. The answer is, not much. But she genuinely loves to perform, has an abundance of talent, even if she hasn't exactly endured the supposedly requisite hardships and heartaches of a quintessential blues artist. Fortunately, her worldview is still that of a child.

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She is, however, growing up fast.

The next time I see her, for a July 26 show at Tenny Street Roadhouse, I almost forget her age. Perhaps it's the slathering of pink and purple eye shadow, the shiny black pants and bejeweled tank top. Or maybe it's the way that she controls the room, dancing around the stage, flipping her hair flirtatiously, soulfully crooning songs about job and relationship troubles with a furrowed brow.

In spite of her stellar performance, the selling of sex appeal and star quality in a 12-year-old makes me uneasy.

Her voice and skill have matured noticeably since she cut her album, which dispels any notion that Sunny Girl is just a passing novelty act.

When I ask if she would perform on a show like "American Idol" (or the kids' version, "American Junior"), she responds, "I am past that. It's for amateurs and I am a professional. I would rather be a judge."

Fair enough. She has a lot of confidence in herself, and with good reason. She can convince a paying audience that a little girl really can feel the blues. She even has the big blues guys impressed.

Wolfgang Spider, longtime member of the Detroit Blues Society, has been watching her perform since 1998.

"Two years ago she was good for her age. Now she's just good — compared to anyone," he says. "She's charming, and has remarkable confidence. There is no reason why she could not be a touring professional. If anything, she is on hold because of her age, not her talent."

Sunny Girl says she wants to make music for the rest of her life. She plans to release a live CD in November and hopes to tour the country with the USO on weekends. There are, however, no plans to pull her out of school.

R.J. Spangler, a renowned drummer and chairman of the Detroit Blues Society, first saw Sunny Girl perform a year ago.

"She has the attitude and talent to play, and singing was certainly a smart move," Spangler says, adding, "She is still becoming who she is going to be musically. She is a work in progress, but she has heart, which is good for the blues."

See the Sunny Girl Band on Saturday, Aug. 30, at Tenny Street Roadhouse, 22361 W. Village Drive, Dearborn. Call 313-278-3677 for more information.

Kathleen Davis is a Metro Times editorial intern. E-mail letters@metrotimes.com.

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