

Ernie Southern

By Jo Ann Adorno

Get ready to howl at the moon and stomp your feet! Ernie Southern is one of the finest guitar players and songwriters around. He's a true "Delta Blues" man, with authentic style that's just natural. He calls himself "Curiously Funky." I call him a hoot. He's quite the modest fellow for a man who's won so many music awards and is seen playing almost everywhere. Borders Café quotes, "South Florida's very own blues specialist, Ernie, puts his whole heart and soul into his standing-room-only performances."

Ernie's been in music forever, it seems. He was born in Queens, New York, grew up in Wantagh on Long Island and began his career in his early teens by singing on street corners. He doesn't have a Delta Blues upbringing, but he exhumes it, which is a true sign of a talented musician who can bring you where he wants you to be through his music. When he grew up he listened to old Black roots doo-wop like The Ravens and The Heartpounds, guys who could really sing, and he was influenced by the soulful singing.

Ernie didn't start as a Delta Blues writer/performer but found later on that it was his choice of music. Back in his early teens he recorded and performed with the doo-wop a cappella group Nick and the Knacks. They opened for artists like Anthony and the Imperials, The Earls and the Four Seasons. Their band played well-known clubs like the Black Cat and the Golden Slipper. They became a favorite on Lou Dean's Bayshore Rock and Roll Shows and appeared on TV in the 1960s show "Zachary." Their appearance earned them an audition and recording contract offer with Chess Records. This background gave Ernie Southern his huge stage presence, which he nurtured and has today.

The Vietnam War prevented Ernie and his band from pursuing their musical endeavor with Chess as they were all drafted. Ernie joined naval Intelligence aboard the U.S.S. Enterprise and spent his next four years studying the music of masters like Lightnin' Hopkins and Blind Lemon Jefferson, who were simple and soulful. He fine-tuned not only his writing skills, but also guitar, slide guitar and bass.

The '70s brought Ernie to the Jazz-Rock-Fusion genre, and he played bass in the psychedelic atmosphere of Berkeley, California. His talent was recognized by greats like Elvo Damante and classical composer Darius Meaux, with whom he studied. He co-wrote "Sailing Thru" with Bill Hennessey which was a regional hit in the northeast. Bill Hennessey now lives on the Space Coast as well, and on May 12 he joined Ernie onstage at Riverview Park in Sebastian for a concert where he played keyboard.

The year 1979 brought Ernie to Ft. Lauderdale. There he worked with a wide variety of bands and styles and, with "The Five Boroughs" band leader, Frank Iovino, co-wrote "Like a Kid at Christmas," which is an international perennial Christmas hit to this day. Exploring musical genres, by 1992 Ernie became a well-known bass player for the retro-rock group Risk and toured with them. They were a trio that was supposed to be a combo of Rush and Kiss. The other members were into being stars, but Ernie was just into the music, so it didn't work out for him. He feels they were marketed all wrong, and he decided to go solo.

It was after his time with Risk that he moved on to the Delta Blues style and over the past ten years has made a huge return to writing, playing and performing with such acts as John Hammond, John Mooney and Catfish Keith, just to name a few. His huge stage presence is also attributed to his mastery of not only Delta Blues, but also Rock and Roll and R&B. When he heard the originators of Delta Blues, like Robert Johnson and Charlie Patton, he found it was like doo-wop but was played with guitar. Instead of having a group, you had the guitar; the slide sound was the harmony. Stomping on a "porch-board" bass gave the beat, and you'd sing to it all. His guitar is beautiful-- custom made from stainless steel-- and gives "the sound" that Ernie is known for. He uses a wrench socket as a slide and an industrial clamp to hold his music. Ah...hardware used for music!

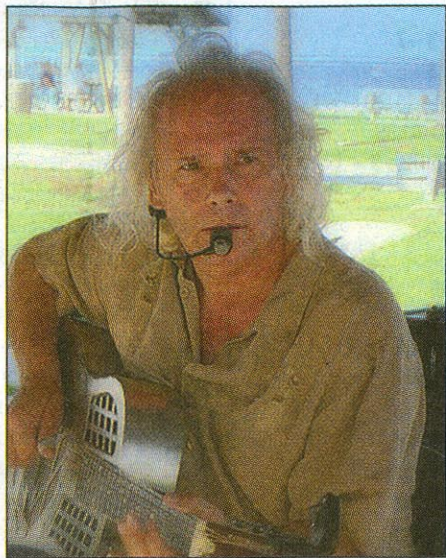
Delta Blues is dance music for people who didn't have any money for fancy equipment, and the music is infectious. He says it took him 50 years to find this niche (although he's only 58). Delta Blues is the actual roots of popular music; as Ernie puts it, "Delta Blues had a baby and they named it Rock and Roll." What everyone from Eric Clapton all the way to AC/DC did was riffs in simple format in the true Delta Blues style, but they made it all loud with amplifiers. It took several years, but groups like Led Zeppelin and The Rolling Stones now credit much of their music to Delta Blues artists like Muddy Waters. He points out that Eric Clapton always credits Robert Johnson for much of his music.

In 2003, Ernie Southern won the People's Choice award at the Ft. Lauderdale Blues Festival, and he also won the South Florida Blues Challenge. In 2004 his South Florida Blues Challenge win brought him on to Memphis, and he finished as a top finalist in the acoustic division in the International Blues Foundation's worldwide competition (known as IBC) for best unsigned blues artists. The event featured more than 90 different acts from around the world. He's also a two-time American Song Fest Award winner.

Ernie's performed at Blues Festivals everywhere, not only the Riverwalk Blues Festival in Ft. Lauderdale, but also the Florida City Link Music Fest, Frannipalooza Blues Bash, Broward County Fair, the Jingle Bell Blues Fest, Hoodoo Voodoo Halloween Ball there, the Space Coast Jazz & Blues Fest on Merritt Island and the Earth Awareness Festival. Wow, but it's our luck that he moved from Ft. Lauderdale to Indian River County where he now resides with his wife, Franni.

The Frannipalooza Blues Bash is named after Franni. She was a fundraiser/promoter who put on Blues shows for charity, benefiting Hospice and food banks among other charities in South Florida. The Bash took place annually for 13 years and was started in her back yard. When 1,000 people started showing up it was moved to a park and continued to grow every year.

Franni was in a chartered bus accident and suffered brain and spinal cord injury. She had to stop putting on the shows and had to slow down the pace, so they relocated to the



Sebastian area for a quieter lifestyle. It's five years since the accident, but she's still having surgeries. They're hoping that her upcoming surgery will be her last and that she'll get better. She looks forward to the day when she'll be able to organize events to benefit our Space Coast area. They both feel that a "Frannipalooza Festival" for charity in our area would be incredible, as Franni is a natural go-getter to book the acts and already knows hundreds of Blues artists. She's well known to all musicians who come through Florida.

Another issue important, to not only Ernie and Franni but most of the Blues artists in the area, is a formation of The Space Coast Blues Society through the diligence of Sue Luley, who has taken on this huge project as acting active president. Blues players can contact Ms. Luley by e-mailing earthfestival@bellsouth.net and join the society, which currently meets at places like Lou's Blues and the Beach Shack. Ernie says, "This area needs a Blues Society because so many artists are deeply into the music and have been for a long time, and so many people just love the music, and will be there for it."



Franni Southern and Sugar

In 2004 Ernie released his CD "Living Blues," a compilation of true Delta Blues music. By mid-July "Ain't Goin' Bald" should be released. His CDs are available on his Web site at www.erniesouthern.com, which is updated monthly. You can hear clips of his music as well as view a complete listing of his upcoming performances from Pompano Beach on up to Cocoa.