

River Cities Reader

Arts, Business, Culture and Politics from the Quad Cities

Renaissance Man(dolin) -- Rich DelGrosso,

Friday, 6:30 p.m., Tent Stage

Written by Mike Schulz

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As a fledgling musician growing up in Detroit, Rich DelGrosso admits to being heavily influenced by such artists as Jimi Hendrix and Cream. So, of all possible instruments, what led the young, rock-oriented DelGrosso to embrace the mandolin?

"I'm Italian," he says with a laugh. "End of story."

Actually, it's just the beginning of the story. In a phone interview, the Los Angeles-based musician/writer/educator - who is making his third appearance at the Mississippi Valley Blues Festival, and was nominated for a 2006 Blues Music Award in the catchall "Other" Best Instrumentalist category - admits that he "sort of came through the rock 'n' roll portal," playing guitar "since I was 11 or 12." He quickly became a blues fan as well "by listening to Muddy Waters and the roots," but it wasn't until his final year of high school, while on a family vacation in Italy, that DelGrosso discovered the beauty of the mandolin, the musical instrument that would eventually shape his career.

"It's the tone of the instrument," DelGrosso says. "It just sounded so bright and strong and, of course, expressive. The mandolin sounds great with piano and guitar. It's another voice - a nice counterbalance to the other instruments - and it works really well in that it has such a different voice." Thinking "you know, that could be fun ... ,"

DelGrosso returned from Italy with a mandolin in hand, and although he didn't yet know how to play the instrument, he began teaching himself how to read music for mandolin by playing "old-timey" songs. (In instrumental music, DelGrosso notes with a laugh, "everybody starts out with fiddle tunes.")

Yet during his musical experimentation, DelGrosso didn't realize that his passion for the mandolin and his passion for the blues could, one day, make for an excellent match.

"I was heavy into blues," he says, "but I didn't think of playing mandolin blues until a friend of mine mentioned the name of Johnny Young." Young was a famed blues mandolin player out of Chicago, and although he passed away (in 1974) before DelGrosso had the chance to see him perform live, his work made a lasting impression on the youth from Detroit.

"I picked up his record," DelGrosso says, "and I said, 'That's it. That's the stuff I wanna do.' And then I started doin' research on all of the other people that used to play mandolin in the blues, and there are actually a whole bunch."

In fact, two of this bunch - James "Yank" Rachell and Howard "Louie Blueie" Armstrong - became not only influences on DelGrosso but mentors as well. After beginning his professional music career playing the "folk scene" in Michigan, he contacted legendary blues performer Rachell in Indianapolis, and "had the great fortune" to play several gigs with him. "He played in a totally different style than anyone else," DelGrosso says.

And blues mandolin performer Armstrong - who, like DelGrosso, lived in Detroit - also became a friend and frequent collaborator. "I learned so much from him," says DelGrosso. "He was the last of the black string-band performers from that '30s generation, and he was steeped