

South Bay bluesman to bring Chicago sound to Saratoga

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When Willie "Big Eyes" Smith was growing up in Helena, Ark., in the 1940s, he would listen to the likes of Sonny Boy Williamson and Pinetop Perkins on his hometown radio station and dream of one day playing the blues.

"I was knocking on tin buckets and beating on the bed," says Smith, 72. "But we were so down on our luck, there just wasn't no money to buy nothing with. I just kind of let it slide till I got to Chicago."

There, on a trip with his mother at age 17, Smith heard Muddy Waters play his electric, hard-driving version of the Delta blues, and Smith's life was never the same again.

But he is far from alone in that respect. From the British rockers of the '60s to today's crop of hot young players, the sound of Chicago blues has left a profound mark on generations of musicians and music lovers.

San Jose guitarist and bandleader J.C. Smith will pay tribute to the past, present and future of the Chicago blues this weekend by hosting two shows at Villa Montalvo: "The Young Guns" on Friday and "The Legends of Chicago Blues" on Saturday.

Now a fixture on the South Bay blues scene, East Side native Smith got a relatively late start, releasing his first CD as a guitarist and bandleader just seven years ago.

He got a big boost a few years back in Chicago, where he struck up a conversation with an older musician who happened to share his last name. But it wasn't until the younger Smith looked at the man's business card that he realized he was talking to Willie "Big Eyes" Smith, the legendary drummer for Muddy Waters in the 1960s and '70s.

"He just started laughing, 'cause I was jumping up and screaming," J.C. Smith says.

The elder Smith took his new friend to the blues haunts of Chicago, introducing J.C. and giving him a chance to jam with many of the city's greats. Several, including Willie, helped out on his 2004 release, "That's What I'm Talk'n 'Bout."

So now J.C. Smith is returning the favor by providing a California stage for some of Chicago's leading lights. On Friday, Smith and his band will back up two of the scene's current favorites, Chico Banks and Mike Wheeler, plus 14-year-old guitar wunderkind Little Chris.

J.C. Smith discovered the youngster — who was raised in northern Indiana and now lives with his family in Kauai — when he was asked to back up some kids at the Chicago Blues Festival.

"He looked like a little surfer, and he just came out, and he took control of the band and just played his butt off," Smith says. "So when Villa Montalvo called, he was one of the first I thought of."

Unlike Chris, Mike Wheeler has been playing the blues for decades, building a solid reputation but never making it big. By day, he works in housekeeping at the University of Illinois Hospital. After Saratoga, he will be jetting off for gigs in France and Monaco.

"I'm kind of amazed they called it 'Young Guns,' " the 47-year-old says with a laugh, "but I guess I'm young compared to some people."

That's certainly true considering that 95-year-old Pinetop Perkins is on Saturday's bill.

Willie Smith remembers hearing Perkins on the legendary "King Biscuit Time" radio show when Smith was "nothing but a little bitty boy" and Perkins was already a blues veteran.

But the two have now been friends and colleagues for years, first playing together in Waters' band in the 1970s and then continuing on in the Legendary Blues Band.

"He gets a kick out of it," says Smith of his older friend's remarkable longevity. "I think what really keeps him going is the music."

At Saturday's show, Willie Smith's band will open, with Willie focusing on vocals and harmonica and leaving most of the drumming to his son, Kenny. Before long they'll be joined by Perkins and guitarist James Wheeler (no relation to Mike), a longtime sideman to Otis Clay and Otis Rush.

Of course there's no way J. C. Smith will miss the opportunity to join in.

"I'm not really an on-fire guitar player, so I kind of already play like an old man," Smith says with a laugh. "I fit right in."