

The Story So Far

BY JOHN T. DAVIS

Centuries. That's how much collective experience the veterans of Austin's vaunted music scene share. They're lives writ large. They've not only lived history, they've made it. In this series, we explore what it's like to stand in the shoes of folks like...

W.C. CLARK

A NATIVE AUSTINITE, BORN IN THE HISTORIC ST. JOHN'S NEIGHBORHOOD NEAR THE PRESENT-DAY HIGHLAND MALL, W.C. Clark played his first professional gig at age 16 at the landmark Victory Grill. After a six-year residency at another famous East Side venue, Charlie's Playhouse, Clark went on the road with Joe Tex and began to gestate his own easy-on-the-ears fusion of soul, blues and Texas R&B. But it was as a bandmate and mentor to the young white blues musicians migrating to Austin that Clark had his greatest impact.

He introduced the youngbloods to the old blues hands on the East Side and forged a link between the generations. His bands Southern Feeling, Triple Threat (featuring Stevie Ray Vaughan and vocalist Lou Ann Barton) and the W.C. Clark Blues Revue all showcased up-and-coming young players and furnished them with valuable exposure and the benefits of Clark's wisdom and friendship. Payback of a sort came in 1989, on the occasion of Clark's 50th birthday, when a tribute to Clark starring Jimmie and Stevie Ray Vaughan, The Fabulous Thunderbirds' Kim Wilson, Angela Strehli, Lou Ann Barton and Will Sexton was filmed for an episode of *Austin City Limits*. Clark's latest project, besides continuing to mentor young musicians, is a live album recorded at the Saxon Pub.

Clark was playing bass with the Charlie's Playhouse house band, Blues Boy Hubbard and the Jets, when he saw the first fumbling attempts at integration from onstage. "What was going on was university kids started coming to the East Side," he says. "Which was really funny, 'cause I'm up there onstage playing, and I'm seeing a gap—white on this side, black on this side. I never had those racial problems. I wanted to just go play down the middle with my guitar and be loved on both sides. It's still funny to me.

"We would have dance contests at Charlie's Playhouse, and Roy Head [who later became a star with the song "Treat Her Right"] was living in Kyle. He would win the talent show on Blue Monday by dancing on his head. And there was a football player named Bobby Layne who would come in there. He loved it so—he'd just get him a table and put a fifth of liquor up on his table for anyone to come around and get a drink."

By the '60s, the blues scene on the East Side was dying out, so Clark went on the road with Joe Tex. "I left Joe Tex and came back



to Austin," he recalls, "and then I met Angela Strehli, and we formed Southern Feeling. I'd go to her house or Denny Freeman's or Paul Ray's, and they would have all these old, obscure records. I'd hear records of black people in the penitentiary, singing and chopping with hoes! I'd never heard anything like that before, because black people weren't interested in that stuff. And then I understood. 'Oh, OK, that's where it comes from.' I've been hooked ever since.

"Once Southern Feeling went away, I went back to work as a mechanic at McMorris Ford. And Stevie Ray Vaughan would come down there. He'd say, 'W.C., man, what are you doing to your hands? Look at all that grease under your fingernails! Man, don't mess your hands up like that! Why don't you come and play with me?' And that's when we formed Triple Threat."

Later, when he formed the W.C. Clark Blues Revue, he would work with young musicians in his house and put them in his band for some exposure. "I'd stick them out there in front of the people to see and say, here's a new musician in town. From there, it moved to teacher—didn't name myself these things—and on to 'Godfather.' I just woke up one day, and people were calling me Godfather!

"I never expected to get rich in the first place, but I did everything every other rich person ever did. I ate the best food, stayed in the best hotels. I've done TV, movies, records, got my own record label and publishing company. I've been overseas and been in the best areas of Russia, Germany, Turkey, the Canary Islands. I've got an international blues award from France. All of my dreams have come true."