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Dave Keyes

Tickling the Keys Keeps Him Tops on the Scene

By Guy Powell

ONE OF THE MOST sought after keyboard players in New York City, whether blues, R&B, Gospel, soul, or rock and roll, is Mr. Dave Keyes. Having had the pleasure of witnessing Dave's artistry from the audience as well as tearing things up with him on stage, Dave is a consummate professional who knows how to make the star of the show shine even brighter. And when he is not accompanying a who's who of artists as a sideman, he'll shine even brighter as he fronts his own Dave Keyes Band. Dave also has worked extensively on Broadway most notably with famed songwriters Leiber and Stoller when he was one of the conductors for the 7-year run of the Grammy's winning musical *Smokey Joe's Cafe*.

I caught Dave while he was back at home during a brief break in his tour schedule with 60's rock diva Ronnie Spector.

Born in Manhattan in 1956, at age 7 Dave was taking classical piano lessons, then also took up trumpet in elementary school. By High School he was also playing baritone and French horn in his High School marching bands. But all throughout that time, Dave Keyes was all about them keys.

Going to college at Tufts University in Boston propelled Mr. Keyes into the life of a professional musician. "I answered an ad in a Boston paper straight out of college and got a gig touring with The Platters, so I've never re-

ally held a straight job other than driving a cab here and there while in college if I needed to supplement my income. But in New York City back in those days it was a very fertile time – steady gigs all around. Lots of country western back then. The next gig after the Platters was touring with Sleepy LaBeef, a rockabilly legend who recorded on Sun records so I got my Jerry Lee Lewis chops together playing with him. I played a Helpinstill Roadmaster at that time which was an incredible portable acoustic piano. I also did some extensive touring in Spain with Sleepy where he was a huge artist, playing 10,000 seat bullrings and arenas. When I returned to NYC in the mid 80's, I hooked up with a sax player, Stan Bronstein, who had played with John Lennon's backup band Elephant's Memory - and Stan had a swing band, Swing Fever, that I would work with all the time, private parties, weddings on weekends and a lot of Blues and R&B gigs at places like Dan Lynch's. We'd do trio gigs together and Stan also had the 8 piece big band – I'd work with him, he'd work with me – just so much music in the city. I played the Lone Star Cafe all the time, opening for so many greats like the Neville Brothers, Albert Collins, Yellowman, Son Seals, Albert King, Memphis Slim – it was a great time to hone in on your craft. It just seemed like no one ever slept back in the 80's. Clubs were crowded from Monday to Sunday."

Well, there was a lot of cocaine flowing back then!

Ha ha, yea, I guess – but whatever it was that was keeping the scene alive, they were great times in New York City.

Did places like Lone Star or Dan Lynch's have any house pianos?

Most places didn't. The Lone Star actually had a CP80, which I hated to play – it had strings, it was an early electrified acoustic piano that the action was just horrible on. Before that they had an acoustic piano at the Lone Star for a long time too – and there was an acoustic piano at City Limits too, another place I played a lot. Dan Lynch's you had to bring your own gear. I was still using that Helpinstill at that time too – at least it was a real acoustic piano that had a great Helpinstill pick up in it.

What kind of gear do you prefer to play on stage today?

Well, if it's a solo, duo or trio setting, I want an acoustic piano. But generally speaking, the gigs I do with guitar players and full bands, I want to be heard and I don't want to have to bang the crap out of something to be heard, so I'm very comfortable playing a digital piano where I can be heard in the mix.

So mic'ing an acoustic is not easy to control?

It's more the volume that other people play at...

Yeah, I guess playing with Popa Chubby is gonna get a little loud!

Maybe if I did a duo with him it could work!

Do you play stacked keys, a single keyboard, what?

Well, I have a Nord now that gets great piano and organ sounds, so I can split the keyboard down the middle and get away with a single. If I'm in Europe, say with Chubby, we'll rent two keyboards.

One of my pet peeves with keyboard players is when they're set up in a way that the audience can't see their

hands – it's like you hear all this magical stuff happening – but you can't see the hands or the fingers – so it would be someone sitting there playing to a track for all we'd know!
I always try and set up sideways to the audience so folks can see what I'm up to.

Ever get a gig expecting equipment to be playable and find that not to be the case?

Oh, once I believe I was in Italy and they had this real junk 62 note thing that wasn't much better than a kids toy – horrible action, it was not gonna go well for me that night – and fortunately it started raining after two songs and they canceled the show! I left it out in the rain – hopefully ruined it because it wouldn't have taken much to put an end to that things life!

What did Allen Toussaint mean to you?

I opened for him at the Lone Star back in the 80's and 90's – he was the nicest man. He totally blew me away, a great inspiration. As fluid as he was a player, I think he was an even greater writer and producer – he just made great records and wrote great songs! As players, all those New Orleans guys – Professor Longhair - that stuff is just incredible. I can play that style, but there are so many who really specialize in it and really play it.

Is there someone who you consider a piano hero?

Leon Russell. He combined the rock and gospel in an incredible way. Part of it is timing – I was a teenager in High School really getting into music – I saw the movie Mad Dogs and Englishmen about that Joe Cocker tour and I loved the way Leon played, the way he sang – he's funky rock and roll. Jerry Lee Lewis meets Professor Longhair by way of the Allman Brothers, you know? He was swampy. And he's a great songwriter too. Add in that voice, which cut through everything. I saw him pretty early in my concert-attending days, and his command of the stage was just the total package and influenced me greatly.

Was there any specific musical event that changed your life?

One of the coolest concerts I ever saw was probably my first concert - my mother took me to a concert where BB King opened for The Who and the headliner was Jefferson Airplane. My Mom only made it through BB and the Who – I think we left after the first Jefferson Airplane song- But it was an amazing show! But even more life-changing is when I was in public school there was a great jazz piano player named Billy Taylor who was a great educator also. You talk about blues in the schools – he was a major mover in exposing kids to music in schools – and there was this new thing called Jazz Mobile in New York City – he was very instrumental in that program. He came to my school in like 6th grade and did a show and it grabbed me right then. I was impressed with him as a player, as a person, as a human being.

Aside from piano and brass, any other instruments you consider yourself a 'player' of?

I can play electric bass a little – I messed with upright bass in school – but I'm not a bass player.

No drums? With your independence, I thought sure you'd say you could probably blow me away on the kit!

Maybe I could get by in a minimal setting – don't worry

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Guy I'm not taking any gigs from you anytime soon.

Well, you wouldn't be the first or the last! How about those keyboards you sling around your neck like a guitar – Johnny Drummer plays one a lot these days – never tried that?

Oh, a Keytar? Yeah, I actually did own one of those – messed up my wrists though so I got rid of it. It was a good idea at the time but could mess with your muscles.

How about favorite festivals?

I've played the Lugano (Switzerland) Blues To Bop quite a bit, definitely my favorite.

Do you have a favorite blues highway?

Highway 61.

Any favorite blues city?

I've spent a lot of time in Memphis – and of course Chicago.

Is there any artist out there still breathing who you'd like get on stage with?

Keith Richards.

How about someone who has passed – whether you ever played with them or not – that if you could bring 'em back for one night only to share the stage with?

Hmmmmmm, I guess it'd have to be Muddy Waters.

When you arrive at the Pearly Gates what song would you play to get in?

'A closer walk with Thee' – an old gospel tune I play all the time in my shows – I play it with Alexis P. Suter these days with the Ministers of Sound, and I've played it with Marie Knight who used to sing with Sister Rosetta Tharpe.

Did you ever record it?

Not yet, but I know there are some versions out there on Youtube...

Dave Keyes is not just a great musician and a powerfully, soulful singer – that only gets you in the door. He is also a wonderful person – and his ability to adapt to any musical situation as well as any social situation his musical gigs may put him in – is what keeps people coming back to hire him and see him perform, time and time again. With a resume as deep as Dave's (I will not go through it all here – I don't have the time or space!) and a schedule as filled as his (finding an open date in his schedule is almost as hard as finding a free parking spot in Manhattan!) I am quite comfortable stating that Dave Keyes is as in demand a keyboardist as there is in this great city and it is quite comforting to know that, when not on tour, he is likely playing somewhere real close to home – a very good situation for the folks of New York City to be in.