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## Westerly – *and the Blues*

By Ellyn Moran Santiago

*The Sun Staff*

WESTERLY – “Now, I want you boys to understand some thing.

“You’re in this too deep now.

You’re musicians and if you don’t play music, you start to die.”

The advice offered by ‘Roomful of Blues’ mentor Count Basie in the early 1970s was sage, band co-founder Al Copley says now.

He and the vast majority of local homegrown blues, jazz and rock musicians are still strumming, picking, blowing and playing – albeit in large part across the pond, and we’re not talking Winnapaug; Copley lives and tours in Europe. And his benefit gig in Westerly this Saturday is a rarity.

Copley, a blues genius on the ivories, critics agree, and now-legendary guitarist Mike “Duke” Robillard founded the blues band Roomful of Blues in late 1967. The plan then, Copley said, was to try and make it to the Newport Folk Festival. That didn’t happen, but the band was born in a town, Copley said, filled with an “amazing constellation of characters and plenty of amazing musicians.

The 1960s Westerly rock and blues scene included Greg Piccolo’s ‘The Groupe,’ and The Variations founded in 1965 by Piccolo, Robillard, Ed Parnigoni, Richie Ainsworth and Fran Valliere. But it would be Roomful that would evolve and last, and last.

In Roomful, Fran Christina sat behind the kit (and would not long after play drums for the Fabulous Thunderbirds) and Larry Peduzzi plucked the bass. In the very early years Roomful played regional clubs and coffeehouses. By 1970, and certainly by 1971 when the band played their first gig at the home of Westerly blues, the Knickerbocker Café, the band discovered jump blues. So a soulful horn section was brought on board – saxophonists Greg Piccolo, Rich Lataille and Doug James.

But the jump blues style the band would incorporate as their own was less born than discovered, Copley said.

“It was always there, but we did-n’t know it existed. Once we did, it became ours for the understanding.”

Copley recalled people “like Al Sculco, who knew all about swing and chased me down to teach me to loosen up with my playing.”

“(And) the record collector on Elm Street who brought Coleman Hawkins to town in 1959,” before the music scene of the 1960’s, Copley said. Then there was the *Time* magazine writer who vacationed in Watch Hill and “showed me that Nat Cole was famous for being a pianist before becoming the most beloved singer.”

“We were coming into our own.”

At around the same time, people swarmed to the Knickerbocker to see

another local fav, the Kevin Crandall Band.

Other “veterans of that scene” included Ed Parnigoni, Roomful bassist; Keith Sorenson, Sheiks guitarist; keyboardist Ed Hanks; Dave Lang, drummer for the Rythm Kings; and Crandall previously with the Wildcats and the High Rollers and the famous and beloved Johnny Nicholas’ and his Rhythm Rockers.

So why do so many great musi-cians, especially blues players come from Westerly?

“It’s a question that I’ve been asked countless times and I really don’t know if there is one definitive answer,” said Sugar Ray Norcia.

Norcia was Roomful’s harp player, front man and singer from 1991 to 1997; now of Sugar Ray and the Bluetones fame. He said that the area has been “blessed with a lot of talented people.”

“I’ve been known to say that there must be something in the water. (Or in the homemade wine!) I can state that my late dad, Albert Norcia, was a well respected music teacher in the Westerly school sys tem and I truly believe he may have inspired quite a few students to appreciate music more passion-ately,” he said. Norcia, who was born in Westerly and raised in Pawcatuck, said that it is also due to “the fans.”

“Fans have always been supportive through the years. They have played an important role by going out to hear live music giving the artists opportunities to work,” he said.

Roomful mastered the jump blues style and would! go on to receive national and later international acclaim. The story goes like this: After fully coming into its own, Roomful of Blues would soon be the band of the Knick (See related story). From the late 70’s through the 1980’s, the Knickerbocker was “our home base,” Copley said. And the band brought in “blues heroes” like Big Joe Turner, Eddie “Cleanhead” Vinson, Roy Brown, Albert Collins, Johnny Copeland, even the Fabulous Thunderbirds and the legendary Stevie Ray Vaughan. And Roomful of Blues would play the club for an astonishing 15 years, but would also see plenty of changes even as it toured with the greats – like Basie – and ultimately sign with Island records.

The rest is the history of Westerly blues.

“When I was 21, Big Joe (Turner) said, ‘Don’t the blues make you feel so happy?’” Copley said. “I didn’t know what he meant then, but I sure do now.”

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