

Vallejo Times-Herald

Sunday Outlook

Sunday June 22, 2008



Courtesy photo

MICHAEL ROBINSON takes his upbeat blues to the Solano County Fair on July 9, the same night B.B. King headlines.

Bay Area bluesman content to play fair in his hero's shadow

By **RICH FREEDMAN**

Times-Herald staff writer

Bay Area blues musician Michael Robinson wrote "Even Jesus Had the Blues" with B.B. King in mind.

Who would figure that Robinson and King will play a few feet apart on July 9 at the Solano County Fair? While King works the arena stage at 8 p.m., Robinson delivers sets at 8:30 and 11 p.m. at the Bay Stage.

Don't think Robinson doesn't know who will be just down the road.

"When I first got into the blues a few years

IF YOU GO:

Who: Michael Robinson

Where: Bay Stage, Solano County Fair

When: July 9, 8:30 and 11 p.m.

Info: Robinsonband.com

back, I went out and bought B.B.'s first two albums on CD and listened to those songs a lot," Robinson said. "I also have a three-volume home study program in which he plays and is interviewed about his

(See **BLUES**, B2)

Blues

(From B1)

tone and technique.”

Yep, Robinson would play “The Thrill is Gone” in every show, though he’ll bow to the master on this night.

“It would be a thrill to meet him. But he is going to be very busy, so my guess is I won’t get that chance,” Robinson said.

If given the shot at a brief chat with King, Robinson said he’d ask about balancing home life with touring. “I am a pretty serious family man, so I’d like to know if you can tour relentlessly and still have a great relationship with your wife and kids,” Robinson said.

Robinson lives in the Oakland hills and scheduled 25 performances from Davis to Half Moon Bay this summer.

It’s all about working the phones, he said. “Our motto: pitch, pitch, pitch,” Robinson said. “I recently got out a map of the Bay Area and made a list of the towns we had already played and a list where we needed to make an entrance. Vallejo was at the top of the list.”

When Robinson was doing everything but sending the fair booking manager roses, “I did not know that B.B. King was on the bill until after we agreed on the date,” he said.

Robinson was a mere 10 when he figured music would be his passion,

‘Musically, I’d like to be known as a good songwriter who also put on a great live show, one that pays homage to those who have gone before me but still offers something unique.’

— Michael Robinson

though “there was a 25-year delay. As a kid, music was my first love. I bugged my dad for guitar lessons, but that ended up a disaster. I had a horrible guitar teacher who insisted I learn corny songs. My dad gave me his old Sears guitar that was way too big for me. He recently recalled with irony that the teacher said I had no talent for the instrument. I remember leaving the music store thinking, ‘Now what?’”

Robinson didn’t pick up the guitar again until he turned 35 when a girlfriend showed him how to play bar chords.

“I was writing my own songs within weeks and practicing hours a day until my wrists were so sore I had to ice down at night,” Robinson said.

The next breakthrough, he continued, came at 44 “when I took a workshop with Bay Area blues legend Johnny Nitro. I knew my life was about to change, and change it did.”

Robinson dumped his alternative rock gig, took up blues, and hasn’t looked back. That was two years ago and, at 51, he’s lovin’ life.

“I practice almost every day,” Robinson said. “I also still put in time learning songs and licks off the CDs. There are no shortcuts to getting better, no matter how long you have played. I try to evaluate my progress every six months or annually and then work on areas I feel I need to improve in my playing or my singing.”

Robinson said he’d like to be known for “having more fun than just about anybody out there, and for being very persistent, never giving up.”

“Musically, I’d like to be known as a good songwriter who also put on a great live show, one that pays homage to those who have gone before me but still offers something unique. I do think my lyrics and song structures stand out in the blues.”

Robinson discovered this past school year he’s a favorite among young people after performing at his daughter’s sixth grade class.

“The kids love the song, ‘If I Could Marry My Guitar,’” Robinson said. “Occasionally, when I pick up my daughter from school, one of the kids will ask for my autograph. That’s just crazy.”